

**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women  
Forty-fourth session  
20 July to 7 August 2009**

**Informal meeting with entities of the UN system and other stakeholders on a general  
recommendation on 'older women and protection of their human rights'  
21 July 2009**

**Presentation by  
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on behalf of  
The Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

Madame Chairperson,  
Distinguished experts,  
Colleagues and friends

It is an honour for me to address the Committee on behalf of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in relation to the Committee's work towards a general recommendation on older women and protection of their human rights. Three of DESA's Divisions have contributed to today's presentation: the Population Division, which has a long tradition of studying population ageing, including by estimating and projecting the size and characteristics of ageing; the Division for Social Policy and Development, which promotes and supports implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing; and the Division for the Advancement of Women, whose responsibilities include support for the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and its follow-up.

The gender dimensions of ageing are now well recognized. Looking at the demographic aspects of ageing, women constitute a majority of the older population. (Since the time of the First World Assembly on Ageing in 1980, the age of 60 is commonly used to define an "older person".) At the global level, there are 120 women aged 60 or over for every 100 men of the same age. Women aged 60 or over outnumber men of the same age by 66 million. At ages 80 or over, there are nearly 170 women for every 100 men. Nearly everywhere, women are more likely than men to survive to older ages. The majority of older men are married but most older women are not. About one out of every seven older persons lives alone, and older women are usually more likely than older men to live alone. (For details, see the attached note on demographic aspects of ageing, prepared by the United Nations Population Division).

Gender relations structure the entire life cycle, from birth to old age. They influence access to resources and opportunities and shape life choices at every stage. The different circumstances that shape the lives of women and men in old age are the outcomes of the many different opportunities, challenges and constraints that women have in the course of their lives, and result in very different experiences of old age by

women and men. Protection and promotion of the rights of older women therefore calls for a life cycle approach, and targeted policies, programmes and services to prevent, and respond to, discrimination against older women.

We suggest that the Committee consider the following issues in its general recommendation on older women and the protection of their human rights:

- The usefulness of framing the general recommendation from a life-cycle approach that recognizes the impact of discrimination against women throughout their lives on their old age;
- The scope and extent of discrimination and inequality that women encounter throughout their working lives, as well as their lower levels of education which result in older women's greater poverty, ill-health, and lack of or limited access to social security and social protection;
- The persistence of de jure discrimination, including in regard to property and ownership rights, and marriage and family relations, and the impact of such discrimination on women as they reach old age;
- The prevalence of violence against women, which persists in women's old age, and is further exacerbated by age-specific forms of maltreatment and abuse;
- The implications of negative stereotypes, prejudices and practices against women which are perpetuated and compounded in women's old age, and put older women at particular risk of poverty, violence and ill-health; and
- The increased risk of discrimination and violation of their human rights faced by certain groups of older women, including widows, women living in poverty, women in minority groups, or women in rural or remote areas, and in difficult circumstances, such as women in conflict and post-conflict situations, including refugee or displaced women.

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The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) addresses these issues in research and policy analysis, and its support to intergovernmental processes.

The Political Declaration and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, adopted by the Second World Assembly on Ageing held in Madrid, Spain in 2002, recognized that old age is a period of particular vulnerability for women. It put forward a series of policy recommendations aimed at addressing the challenges and opportunities of population ageing in the twenty-first century and at achieving the goal of a society for all ages. The recommendations of the Madrid Plan of Action are organized in three priority areas, namely (1) older persons and development, (2) advancing health and well-being into old age, and (3) ensuring enabling and supportive environments. One of the central themes running through the Plan is the commitment to gender equality among older persons through, inter alia, elimination of gender-based discrimination.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the outcome document of its five-year review (2000) consider the situation of older women in a cross-cutting manner, with a focus on their access to health care services, the need to remove discrimination in the labour market and to enable them to assume decision-making roles.

The General Assembly and the Commission on the Status of Women, which regularly address issues of concern to older women, highlight that policies and programmes, including poverty reduction and development strategies, should integrate attention to the needs of older women.

The issues and concerns covered by these global policy instruments are of direct relevance to the protection of rights of older women under the provisions of the Convention. These include the areas of work, social security and social protection; health and care; participation in decision-making; and violence. Certain groups of older women are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and deprivation of rights, as already noted.

Women's situation in the labour market directly affects their economic and social well-being in old age. Poverty and low income during their earning years often leads to poverty in old age. Women's paid work, which remains characterized by lower salaries, interrupted work histories, and casual and temporary work, reduces their ability to build pensions and other resources for their retirement. Formal pension schemes tied to employment status often link pension entitlements to employment history, thereby reproducing existing gender inequalities. Any existing social security provisions may not protect older women who worked shorter periods, or did not work at all in formal employment. Older women face challenges in remaining, entering or re-entering the labour force, due to both age and gender-based discrimination. Women's unequal access to, and control over, capital, in particular land and credit, has a direct impact on their economic and social well-being in old age. The informal sector, where the majority of women work in many countries, often provides no social security or protection.

It is critical that legal frameworks are in place and implemented that remove and prohibit discrimination based on sex and age in the labour market, especially with regard to hiring, promotion, benefits and social security, as well as in regard to property and ownership rights. Labour and social policies can ensure access to employment, and decent working conditions and guarantee income security for older workers, especially older women. Access to economic resources can provide greater financial security for older women. Basic non-contributory social pensions help reduce inequalities in income and quality of life between older women and men and increase the wellbeing of households. Measures are necessary to secure equal access to basic social services, appropriate social protection/social security measures, with particular attention to women living in poverty in rural areas and urban slums, to enable them to lead independent and healthy lives.

Older women are both caregivers and recipients of care. Much of the care-work – for children, the elderly, the sick – is carried out by women throughout their lives, often on an unpaid basis. The cost of this care work is borne by women, and includes fewer opportunities in the labour market, weaker access to social security benefits, and less time for education, leisure and self-care, and political activities. These factors are compounded in old age, making older women more vulnerable to deprivation of rights.

Women spend a larger proportion of their lives in poor health than men. Their health problems in old age are rooted in the discrimination they face earlier in life. When women have less access to nutrition and health care in their younger years, they face an increased risk of chronic illness in old age. Their access to services, especially in rural and remote areas, may be limited. Health care systems can be biased against older persons and in favour of younger people, especially when resources are scarce, and social barriers can effectively exclude older women from receiving care. As care recipients, older women may not be able to influence decision-making on the quality and cost of care they receive. Older women's health issues must be addressed with a focus on their independence, equality, participation and security.

The precarious situation of older women has been particularly highlighted in the context of HIV and AIDS. Older women may be infected with HIV/AIDS, have responsibility for caring for their ailing adult children and later, when the children die, adopt the parental role for orphans. These women frequently have to become wage earners again. Older women caregivers may find themselves isolated socially because of AIDS-related stigma and discrimination; they may be rejected and have their property seized when their husband dies. This group of older women requires particular attention, including legal and social protection, increased access to financial and economic resources, education, as well as access to health services.

The forms of violence that women experience across the life-cycle extend to older women. Older women, in particular widows, may be subjected to a range of physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, and to particular forms of violence, maltreatment and harmful practices based on their age. Such violence and maltreatment may be based on stereotypes and prejudice, and can be perpetrated by members of the family, caregivers, members of the community and strangers. Targeted responses are necessary to protect older women from violence, and to provide services, support and access to justice.

We are pleased to draw the attention of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to several departmental publications, including a publication entitled "Gender dimensions of Ageing" prepared by DAW and two publications of the Division for Social Policy and Development: "Regional dimensions of the ageing situation" (2008) and "Guide to the National Implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing" (2008). A report of the Expert Group Meeting on "Rights of Older Persons", organized by the Division for Social Policy and Development, from 5 - 7 May 2009, in Bonn, is also available.

Thank you.

## Annex

### Background on population ageing and older women

Prepared by: Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs

The highlights below have been drawn from recent and ongoing work in the Population Division/DESA.

#### *A. Ageing populations<sup>1</sup>*

In the more developed regions in 2009, 21 per cent of the population is already aged 60 years or over and that proportion is projected to reach 33 per cent in 2050. In developed countries as a whole, the number of older persons has already surpassed the number of children (persons under age 15), and by 2050 the number of older persons in developed countries will be more than twice the number of children.

Population ageing is less advanced in developing countries. Nevertheless, the populations of a majority of them are poised to enter a period of rapid population ageing. In developing countries as a whole, just 8 per cent of the population is today aged 60 years or over but that proportion will more than double by 2050, reaching 20 per cent that year.

Globally, the number of persons aged 60 or over is expected almost to triple, increasing from 737 million in 2009 to 2 billion by 2050. Furthermore, already two thirds of the world's older persons live in the less developed regions and by 2050, nearly 80 per cent will do so.

The older the population age group considered, the more rapidly is the population increasing. Thus, whereas the number of persons aged 60 or over is expected to triple between 2009 and 2050, that of persons aged 80 or over (the oldest-old) is projected to increase four-fold, to reach 395 million in 2050. Today, just about half of the oldest-old live in developing countries but that share is expected to be nearly 70 per cent in 2050.

#### *B. Women constitute a majority of the older population and their share of the older population increases with age*

Because women's life expectancy is greater than that of men, women constitute a majority of the older population. At the global level, there are 120 women aged 60 or over for every 100 men of the same age. Women aged 60 or over outnumber men of the same age by 66 million. At ages 80 or over, there are nearly 170 women for every 100 men.

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<sup>1</sup> Information in sections A, B and C is taken from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009). World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision, CD-ROM Edition - Extended Dataset in Excel and ASCII formats (ST/ESA/SER.A/283).

*C. Nearly everywhere, women are more likely than men to survive to older ages*

At rates of mortality in the current period (2005-2010), 79 per cent of the world's newborn girls and 73 per cent of boys can expect to live to age 60. Women surviving to age 60 could then expect to live for an additional 21 years, about three years longer than men who reached age 60. For both sexes, chances of surviving to age 60 and life expectancy after age 60 are markedly higher in the more developed than in the less developed regions (table 1). And, although women can expect to live longer than men nearly everywhere, women's survival advantage tends to be smaller in the less developed regions, particularly in the least developed countries. In the latter group of countries, women who reach age 60 can expect to live another 16.8 years, which is 1.5 years longer than men's life expectancy at age 60. In the more developed regions, by contrast, women reaching age 60 can expect to live another 23.7 years, about 3 years longer than men in those regions.

Table 1. Percentage of men and women expected to survive to age 60 years, and life expectancy at age 60

Development group	Percentage expected to survive to age 60		Life expectancy at age 60 (years)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
World	73	79	18.1	21.2
More developed regions	83	92	19.6	23.7
Less developed regions	71	77	17.3	19.6
Least developed countries	57	61	15.3	16.8

*Source:* United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009). World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision, CD-ROM Edition - Extended Dataset in Excel and ASCII formats (ST/ESA/SER.A/283).

*D. The majority of older men are married but most older women are not<sup>2</sup>*

Marital status can a major effect on the emotional and economic well-being of older persons, particularly those with an illness or disability, as it affects living arrangements and the availability of caregivers. In general, older men are more likely to live with a spouse than older women because of a combination of factors, including the higher life expectancy of women, the tendency of women to marry men who are older than they are, and the higher remarriage rates among older widowed men than among widowed women. The implication of such a situation is that older men are more likely than older women to receive assistance from their spouses, especially when their health fails.

<sup>2</sup> Information in sections D and E is taken from United Nations (2007), *World Population Ageing 2007* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.07.XIII.5).

At the global level, an estimated 62 per cent of older people are currently married and living with a spouse. There are marked differences between men and women. Among older women, 48 per cent live with a spouse, while among older men the proportion living with a spouse reaches 80 per cent. On average, there are only 31 older men *without* a spouse per 100 older women in the same situation.

The general pattern whereby older men are more likely to have a spouse than older women is observed in all countries, although the size of this gender gap varies. For the group of least developed countries, the proportion of older men who are married, 85 per cent, is higher than at the world level, while the corresponding proportion for women, 39 per cent, is lower than the world average.

*E. About one out of every seven older persons lives alone*

Older persons living alone constitute a group that is of natural social and policy concern. Those living alone are more likely to need outside assistance in the case of illness or disability, are at greater risk of social isolation and, especially older women, can face higher risks of poverty. For the world as a whole, the proportion of the population aged 60 or over who live alone is estimated to be 14 per cent.

*Older women are usually more likely than older men to live alone*

More older women than older men live alone in most countries because older women are more likely to be widowed and hence less likely to be living with a spouse. At the global level, the average proportion of women aged 60 or over living alone is about 20 per cent, while only 8 per cent of older men live alone. Gender differences are significantly larger in the more developed regions, where levels of solitary living are relatively higher than in the less developed regions. In the more developed regions, around one third (32 per cent) of older women live alone, as compared to 13 per cent of older men. In the less developed regions, 9 per cent of older women and 5 per cent of older men live by themselves. The levels of solitary living are so much lower in the less developed than in the more developed regions reflect the fact that older persons in less developed countries are more likely to live with children or other relatives.