

UN DESA Virtual Expert Meeting
Building Forward Better for Older Persons Post COVID-19
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**Addressing the age-old problem:
Impact of intersectional discrimination on older persons in the COVID-19 pandemic**

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The world we live in today has been, and continues to be, profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had a major impact on the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms around the world.

The pandemic has seriously affected the lives of many groups and its consequences have been amplified by existing structures of inequality and disadvantage, **but the impact on older persons has been particularly devastating.**

Older persons have shown a greater susceptibility to severe cases of infection and have represented the overwhelming proportion of lives lost. However, the impact of the pandemic has gone well beyond.

The pandemic has highlighted, and amplified the **age-old problem of ageism and age discrimination**, that is still so pervasive and widespread in our society. The pandemic has only served to lay bare this uncomfortable truth.

The specter of ageism and the consequent widespread practice of age discrimination have been having significant impact on the rights of older persons in every aspect of our society. You can be ageist yourself, and at the same time suffer from age discrimination. Many recoil from being called an “older person”, as if being older is something to be lamented or associated with disadvantages.

The tragic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older persons has been well documented in the Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on older people, the report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, and extensive work by UN agencies, civil society organizations and NHRIs.

These included:

- Potential age discrimination in decisions with regard to older persons’ access to medical care, triage and lifesaving measures
- Increased risk of neglect, mistreatment or abuse in care homes and institutions as well as at home
- Reduced access to health services, including home-based visits and community care

- Disconnected from social networks, an increased risk of social isolation and risks to mental health
- An escalation in ageist attitudes, including discrimination against and stigmatization of older persons, as well as disrespectful remarks and hate speech on social media, targeting older persons
- Digital divide preventing older persons to access essential information, online services and social connections

Entrenched ageism is at the root of many of these and other impacts on older persons, that continues to render older persons invisible, in legal and policy framework and data and statistics.

A key challenge here is that ageism is so prevalent and widely accepted, we tend not to recognize it as an issue of discrimination and violation of human rights.

But in reality, as older persons are diverse group, the actual situation of some specific groups of older persons may be exacerbated, as a result of **intersectional or multiple discrimination**. Ageist attitudes and practices are frequently a major contributing factor to the disadvantage and discrimination they already suffer, on the basis of their gender, race, ethnicity, disability and so on.

Older women are particularly at risk where ageism intersects with gender inequalities. They are more likely to face risks in violence, abuse and neglect. Multiplicity of discrimination that women suffer during their lifetime has a cumulative impact in old age. Lack of educational opportunities in young age, translates in difficulties in entering formal labour market. Informal, unpaid care work that many women perform, are not covered by social security and therefore older women are more likely than men to live in poverty and deeply affected by crisis.

Similarly, intersection between older age and disability results in both aggravated forms of discrimination and specific human rights violations against older persons with disability. Older persons with disability tend to have more chronic conditions and less immunity, putting them at more risk of contracting the virus and resulting in death. OHCHR's monitoring work, for example in Ukraine, also found that Older persons and persons with disabilities in long-term care facilities are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, due to their dependency on those who run and support these facilities, and the difficulty for carers and residents to practice physical distancing.

As we seek to build 'forward' better from this crisis towards a more age-friendly and inclusive society, **here are some thoughts** on how we can promote concerted and sustained actions to address the pandemic of ageism, and to address multiple discrimination many older persons face.

First, we need to **shift our narratives around older persons** – away from ageist, paternalistic view to the one that is anchored in full respect for their rights and dignity. Older persons are an incredibly diverse group. Assumptions that older persons are frail or dependent are not only inaccurate, they are harmful.

Second, we need to take on the **structural barriers** at national and international levels, that impede older persons' full enjoyment of their human rights. This includes adopting and modifying legal framework for anti-age discrimination, ensuring effective enforcement mechanisms, implementing programmes to reduce and eliminate ageism in various sectors, including health, employment and education.

Third, addressing the intersectional and cumulative impacts of age discrimination would require **multisectoral and life-course approach**. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing recognized that policies on ageing needs to adopt a broader life course perspective and a society-wide view.

For women, a life course approach to well-being in old age is particularly important, as they face obstacles throughout life with a cumulative effect on their social, economic, physical and psychological well-being in their later years.

Lastly, we need to adopt **a human rights-based approach** that places the rights and dignity of older persons at the centre of our efforts in building forward better from the pandemic.

Older persons are an essential element of the solutions our societies so urgently need today. We need to expand, rather than diminish, the role they play in all aspects of our economy and social life.

This includes more attention and investment to enable their effective participation in decisions that affect their life, as well as to build stronger systems that guarantees their economic and social rights. In other words, we need to develop a comprehensive and systematic approach to the protection of the human rights of older persons, backed by international legal standards and mechanisms,

A comprehensive framework built upon international human rights law would finally put older persons at the centre, as empowered rights-holders and active agents of change, upholding equal rights and dignity, and ensuring their effective and meaningful participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

The hard lessons learned from the pandemic that caused so much pain and suffering for older persons, should be reflected in accelerated efforts towards developing a new international human rights convention on the rights of older persons, which will give us much needed international standards to guide our actions to combat ageism and the intersectionality of age discrimination faced by older persons.

Building forward better from the current pandemic is an opportunity to look beyond its immediate responses. It is an opportunity to address structural causes of inequality and invest in a human rights-based approach that will bring the greatest return – and contributes to building a strong, sustainable, resilient society in which rights and dignity of older persons – and all other people – are respected and protected.