

Older Women in Emergency Crises: Vulnerabilities, Capacities and Opportunities

1. Lack of information and invisibilising of older women

On the one hand, the literature recognizes that different people are affected differently by different crises, for example human rights violations, conflicts or natural disasters, and that persons of different gender and age have specific needs particular to their age and gender. Yet studies consistently point to a lack of attention to the specific needs of different sectors of the population, which includes gender, age, location (especially rural vs urban), class, race, ethnicity, religion and other intersecting attributes.

In the rare cases where an “older people” category is considered, this is taken as a homogeneous undifferentiated group of population, whereas in fact the needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of the old and older-old (those 80 years and above) are considerably different. Moreover, even where older people are considered, very rarely is there focus and understanding of the specific vulnerabilities, needs and capacities of older women. Instead, whilst increasing attention is paid to the education of girls, maternal health and sexual violence, older women remain widely ignored in data collection, making it difficult to assess their needs with their contribution rarely recognized.

As such, the experiences of **older women remain largely invisible** despite often facing both gender and age-based discrimination. One of the reasons for this is the **lack of consistent gender and age disaggregated data** - often because there is even a lack of awareness and understanding of the need to collect such data - which consequently may **hide the underlying structural discrimination based on these intersecting characteristics**. As a result, the voices, experiences, perspectives and rights of older women are rarely included in formulating context-specific relevant interventions, national and international policy frameworks.

2. Vulnerabilities of older women in emergency crises

Due to the demographics of ageing, a large proportion of older persons in emergency contexts are women, particularly in displacement settings. As such, overlooking the specific vulnerabilities and needs faced by older persons will affect women disproportionately and, at the same time, ignoring the gender aspect in the support for older persons at the planning/response/recovery stage will result in excluding a large component of the group of older persons and/or not providing appropriate support to older women.

The vulnerabilities of older women and their subjection to intersecting attributes, are inevitably heightened during natural disasters and conflicts in at least the following ways:

- Women typically **live longer** than their male counterparts.
- **Contextual specificities of older women.** Whilst the concept of older people is internationally recognized as 60 years and above, specific contexts dictate that older people, especially older women, may be viewed by society as older in their late 40s and upwards. Failing to recognize the specific context of ‘olderness’ and the

associated needs will result in such persons being excluded from assessment and intervention.

- **Marginalisation and isolation.** Older widows are often among the most marginalised in cultures where inheritance codes dispossess them on their husband's death. A woman widowed in a disaster may be stripped of her last resources. Older widows are less likely to remarry than widowers, leaving them isolated and often reliant on the goodwill of relatives or the charity of neighbours. Older women may be considered a burden by family members in crises and left behind and abandoned when families flee conflict or humanitarian crises, thereby facing the loss of support mechanisms and isolation. Moreover, because women often live in narrow social networks due to social and cultural norms, they may also have limited opportunities to re-establish relationships for support and mutual aid.
- **Poverty.** Gender inequalities that exist throughout the lifetime (i.e. level of education, employment, financial situation) may be exacerbated during crises. Given that women in many countries rely on their husbands for the provision of economic resources and social status, this means that a large percentage of older women are at risk of dependency, dire poverty and neglect. These risks are often compounded by displacement from traditional homes and/or the destruction of traditional social structures. Older women's place in the informal economic sector leaves them with few marketable skills and no retirement compensation. Likewise, women who have been engaged in the informal caring sector for most of their lives receive no pension payments.
- **Health and nutrition.** Unless specifically targeted, older women risk being overlooked during distribution, particularly if they are too frail or weak to wait in lines or are otherwise less visible to humanitarian organizations. This can be especially the case in cultures where women are forbidden to interact with males other than family members. Specific health needs, linked to the ending of the reproductive age, many put at risk women who do not have access to proper counselling and treatment.
- **Displacement may lead to increased risks.** Whilst older women tend to be more numerous in displaced populations, age and gender barriers are likely to exclude older women from decision-making and resources. In displaced communities, traditional support structures that previously existed for older people may no longer exist. Older female displaced persons may face greater responsibilities as heads of households even though they are isolated and destitute. Older people may find themselves taking on new responsibilities, such as looking after orphans and other vulnerable children, whose parents may have been killed or gone further afield.
- **Lack of access to information.** Due to restrictions on mobility, gendered expectations of their social role and limited literacy, older women may lack access to important information and be neglected by outreach efforts, relating to political processes as well as humanitarian assistance.
- **Sexual and gender based violence:** Older women experience particular risks of sexual and gender based violence from relief worker, caregivers and older men. These risks may result from cultural practices which confine women to the home or they may be at risk from rape and sexual assault in mixed- gender communal shelters and collection centres, or while gathering firewood outside camps. Many older women have also been injured, ostracised or killed after being accused of witchcraft, accusations of which are often used to justify the abuse and violence, which range from economic to sexual violence, against older women. Such violations often go

unrecognised because older women may find it harder than younger women to report them due to the stigma and shame attached to such acts.

- **Abuse and exploitation.** Gender roles may exacerbate risks during crises for instance cultural restrictions on the movement, speech and public exposure of women and their bodies increases their vulnerability during emergencies, when they are more likely to be confined to the home in maximum danger. Older women may be excluded from communal shelters where inadequate latrines, mixed sleeping areas and a lack of gender separation break the codes of their faith.

In sum, older women may face a double discrimination in emergency crises based upon their gender and age.

Case study of Syrian and Jordanian older women in Jordan, HelpAge International 2018, noted the following:

79% of older women reported mobility limitations which may impede their physical access to services

72% of older women cannot read or write (compared to 35% of older men).

63% of Syrian older women reported feeling lonely

61% of Syrian older women reported not being able to receive humanitarian assistance.

3. Roles, contributions and capacities of older women

Though the limited literature makes some reference to the role, contributions and capacities of older persons, noting the false perception that older people expect to be passive recipients of aid alone, there is very little reference and possibly understanding of the myriad ways in which older women contribute to the community during and after emergency crises.

Older women play a key positive role during emergencies in at least three ways - through providing inter-generational support, to contributing to livelihoods and to peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Older women play a key role in **providing inter-generational support** during and post emergencies, such as in their role as caregivers, often as head of households and sole caregivers of grandchildren, persons with disabilities etc. At the height of the Darfur conflict in 2005, two-thirds of older women, were raising at least two children (HelpAge International 2012).

Older people often continue to play an active role in **contributing to household income**. Research shows that at least half of people over 60 in developing countries are economically active, and a significant proportion (a fifth or more) are still working later into their 70s (Help Age International 2012). This includes women in conflict and post conflict settings, such as in Burundi where a nationwide network of *les mediatrices*, many of whom operate at the coline level, are engaged in small savings and loans associations as well as subsistence agriculture roles aimed at lifting their families and communities out of poverty. Often older women use intangible cultural heritage to generate income including through know how of eco-farming, as in Jordan.

Older women often play a role in **peacebuilding and conflict resolution** using historical memory and other knowledge and experience which buttresses their authority within the community. Older women are often seen as the carriers of oral histories of positive pre-conflict narratives, such as shared living, neighbourly relations, and being members of “the other” side who married across the conflict divide. In Armenia and Azerbaijan across the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, younger women are working with older women to document and disseminate the older women’s stories of pre-conflict living together and even of how they as older women saw their parents protect the lives of “the other”. In land and property rights disputes which often occur after conflict, older women were turned to in Kosovo, the Kivus and Iraq, to assist with resolution as they know who owned what in and in what form. Women in South Sudan with knowledge of both local conflict grievances and drivers and of community dynamics played a major role during the recent conflict to discourage young male youth not to take up arms and join the fighting. Older women also have a role in countering extremist nationalist narratives and nationalist tendencies amongst younger generations and in Ukraine older women are working in both the conflict affected eastern region of the country and other locations to challenge increasing extremist nationalist narratives and discourse. Likewise, older women in Pakistan are working to raise awareness of the role of women in community mediation, to prevent radicalisation of the younger generation and to advocate for the inclusion of women in key peace and security structures. In certain communities, particular in nomadic communities, older woman can play a role in restorative justice. Older women members of the Syrian opposition have been seeking to participate in the UN-facilitated peace process and constitutional review process. Other older Syrian women have been advocating for the release of family members from detention. All of these experiences and others point to the status, power and authority that older women may wield within families and communities as agents of peaceful change, peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

As a result of emergencies, older women have increased responsibilities for supporting their families, mobilising resources and caring for dependants. Coping strategies, traditional skills and local contextual knowledge are important in mitigating the impact of crises and for putting in place the seeds of a stable, secure and peaceful tomorrow. In many ways, **older women are the glue in communities’ experience of crises; as heads of households, carrying history and memory, as storytellers and peacemakers.**

4. Creating opportunities to see, understand and include older women

- a. Ensure older women’s meaningful participation in national and international policy and decision making processes that impact them and include the rights of older women in national and international policy frameworks.
- b. Support the meaningful participation of older women in understanding their protection and assistance needs and priorities.
- c. Support the meaningful participation of older women in analysis, policy, strategy, and programme design (protection and assistance).
- d. Carry out risk and vulnerabilities analysis of older women to ensure that interventions do not worsen invisibility, marginalization or exclusion of older women.
- e. Develop and use gender-disaggregated and age-disaggregated data and indicators throughout analysis, policy, strategy and programme design and implementation.

- f. Recognize, strengthen and promote the capacities and leadership of older women through understanding the role, standing and contributions of older women in the family, community and society.
- g. Support the role of older women in peacebuilding conflict resolution at the family, community and national level.
- h. Support increased joint academic and practice research on the vulnerabilities, needs and capacities of older women across the breadth of emergency crises (natural disaster and conflict related).

Resources

- HelpAge International, *Practical Issues in Ageing and Development*, December 2005, accessible at http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/_assets/files/tools_and_guidance/age_gender_diversity/HelpAgeInt_Ageing_Emergencies_2005_EN.pdf
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- HelpAge International, *Older People in Disasters and Humanitarian Crises Guidelines for Best Practice*, accessible at <https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/older-people-in-disasters-and-humanitarian-crises-guidelines-for-best-practice.pdf>
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- Jo Wells, *Protecting and assisting older people in emergencies*, Humanitarian Network Policy Paper, December 2005, accessible at <https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/12/networkpaper053.pdf>
- Mossarat Qadeem, *Women's Participation in Transforming Conflict and Violent Extremism*, 2016, UN Chronicle, vol. 52/4, <https://doi.org/10.18356/fc6bf375-en>.
- UNESCO, *Gender Equality Heritage and Creativity*, 2014, accessible at http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/gender-equality-heritage-and-creativity-2014-en_1.pdf
- UNHCR, *Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement*, 2013, accessible at <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4ee72aaf2.pdf>