

**International Forum on the Rights of Older Persons:
Women, Life-cycle and Human Rights**

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Introduction

I want to thank the **Government of Mexico City and the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Center, Population Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean** for their hard work in preparing this important event, and their commitment to a topic that is ever increasingly relevant to our times.

The issue of aging and older persons and within it of its gender dimension, not only has economic and social implications for public policy, but in addition, constitutes a central pillar of any paradigm that has justice and decency and humanity at its center. To raise awareness of the multiple contributions and challenges of the older, and also not so old women, to our societies constitutes a duty of society, especially in the context of a human rights framework.

I am honoured and grateful to represent UN Women on the subject of ageing and gender, which the very renowned Executive Director Michelle Bachelet has stressed 'presents a serious economic and development challenge...that must be addressed as a

priority¹. It is also a great privilege to share this platform with such an array of experts and friends, with whom I share the aspiration of seeing older women's needs and rights prioritized. *La realidad es que todas nosotras llegaremos, tarde or temprano, a este lugar que se llama la vejez. Por lo tanto, tenemos que acutar, es nuestro deber hacia nosotros y nosotras y hacia los que queremos incluyendo la sociedad en el cual viviran nuestros queridos sean los ninas o los abuelos.*

Moreover, the reality is that we will all be there, sooner or later we will all arrive at the same destination called older age. It is time, therefore, to arouse our humanity and compel us to act. Whatever our age, it is our duty to act, a duty towards ourselves and towards all those who matter to us, be it our children or our grandparents. It is about us, about all of us.

I have been asked to speak to the work that UN Women has been doing, in collaboration with a range of civil society organizations and other UN agencies, in preparing its contribution to the State of the World's Older Persons Report. The report is due to be published in October 2012 and, unfortunately, I am not able to discuss the specific findings of our research ahead of its publication. However, I will describe what we learned from the process and how it relates to the themes of this session – woman, life cycle and human rights.

I will speak to three key lessons that emerged in trying to quantify the status of older women across the world: firstly, that a life cycle approach is necessary to both our understanding of, and response to, the needs of older women; secondly, that a life cycle

¹ In her address to the Commission for Social Development (CSD) in February 2011

approach requires us to bridge the gap between gender and ageing; thirdly, that this has significant implications for the human rights of older women.

1. Learning from the Life Cycle Approach

'The dual jeopardy of being old and female' is a phrase that is often used to describe the many challenges that differentially impact the lives of older women. But what lies beneath these words is a much deeper conviction: that the gender discrimination that girls and women experience across their lifetime determines their outcomes in old age.

Consider, for example, postmenopausal health. We know that changes in hormones during the menopause can lead to serious health conditions such as osteoporosis. The result is that the lifetime risk of fractures in women is 40%, compared to only 13% in men. Therefore, it is essential that health policies target menopausal and postmenopausal women, supporting them to build bone mass through exercise and medicine where necessary. However, this is only part of the story. Women's health outcomes following menopause are contingent on their health status prior to the menopause. For example, unwanted pregnancies and poor reproductive health can exacerbate problems in post menopausal health, as can a diet lacking in vitamin D, smoking, and lack of exercise.

This is just one example of the ways in which a life cycle approach is essential to both our understanding and response to the needs of older women. In our research, we found that in order to quantify the status of older women it was essential to look at the data from infancy through old age. Only in this way would we be able to navigate the many chapters that lead to the conclusions.

The life cycle approach is **particularly** important in the case of older women, because of the disproportionate *and cumulative burdens* they face throughout their lifetime as a consequence of sex discrimination. Consider, for example, the relationship between

older women's financial insecurity and discrimination in access to education, income inequalities, and the differential value attributed to domestic and caring responsibilities.

2. Bridging the Gap between Gender and Ageing

Great progress has been made in moving towards a life-cycle approach. For example, the World Health Organization has set out a 'framework for action' on older women's health, which calls on policy-makers to invest in key transition points across the life cycle – when, as they describe, 'risks to well-being and windows of opportunity are greatest'². These include in utero, the first 6 years of a child's life, adolescence, transition from school to the workforce, motherhood, menopause, the onset of chronic illness and widowhood.

Despite this progress, a number of obstacles remain to using a life-cycle approach. The lack of available data disaggregated by age and sex makes it difficult to map the interactions between these key variables across the life-course. Country data tends to focus on the economically active population or women of reproductive age, most notably in the case of violence against women where data is rarely collected for women over age 49. Ironically, here, discrimination is such that past this age, which incidentally is still considered young or at least not "older persons" quite yet (older persons technical are those over 60 years), *discrimination is such that in this context, women cannot expect even to be reduced merely to a statistic – a state of invisibility that is entirely unacceptable and violative of the fundamental precept of human dignity*. The UN Regional Economic Commissions have suggested that this is a key problem in the implementation of MIPAA (Madrid International Plan of Action for the Aging), and a range of UN agencies and NGOs have advocated for improved data collection³.

Recognizing that countries have different statistical capacities, and that initial financial

² Women, Ageing and Health: A Framework for Action; World Health Organization: Geneva, 2007.

³ See, for example, Global Action on Ageing's 'Data Disaggregation Project': http://www.globalaging.org/elderrights/disaggregation_project/index.htm#why

investments are very high for data collection, it is essential that countries receive support to build and improve their statistical capabilities. **A positive example can be seen in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Sistema Regional de Indicadores sobre Envejecimiento (SISE), supported by ECLAC, contains statistical information for the region on ageing and older persons, and *all* indicators within the database are disaggregated by sex.**

A second issue is that gender perspectives are not being effectively mainstreamed into ageing policies and programmes. For example, policies designed to enhance labour force participation among older cohorts are not based on proper analysis of informal sector activity, where women constitute a higher proportion of workers. Equally, in many gender policies, such as those referenced in CEDAW country reports, there is a failure to mainstream an ageing perspective. Again, this can be seen in policies on violence against women, where there is a systematic failure to account for the experiences of older women, thereby limiting the effectiveness of such policies for this group. The result is that older women are too often left in the normative split between gender and ageing, where they remain invisible to the policy-making process. **Ultimately, the failure to mainstream ageing and gender perspectives prevents policies from accounting for the cumulative effect of gender discrimination across the life cycle.**

Human Rights as a Possible Solution

Human rights ensure that all people are respected as equal members of society, and are able to live secure and dignified lives, free from discrimination. They are universally accepted and every person is entitled to the protection they provide, regardless of age, citizenship, nationality, race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality or abilities. Human rights shape our understanding of humanity, and guide the development of our legal and ethical frameworks. Crucially, they enable everyone to participate in, and contribute to, their own development and the development of their society.ⁱ

Much of the evidence that we found in our research points to an infringement on older women's human rights. For example, older women often face denial of access to jobs and healthcare, are subject to abuse, often denied the right to own and/or inherit property, and lack a basic minimum income and social security. We have found that many older women continue to experience multiple discrimination based on a range of impediments, including gender and age discrimination, sexism and ageism.

The universality of human rights means that they have the potential to bridge the gap between gender and ageing, ensuring that women are protected from birth to old age. Human rights, by their very nature, offer a life-cycle approach to our understanding of the rights of individuals. The adoption of General Recommendation 27 by the CEDAW Committee is significant in this respect, because it recognizes that older women constitute a vulnerable group and thus warrant special measures of protection on the basis of both their AGE and GENDER.

But, we have already seen in the case of the *International Bill of Human Rights* that women's humanity does not necessarily guarantee their enjoyment of their human rights – hence the adoption of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Equally, the adoption of General Recommendation 27 was intended to respond to the fact that the *Convention* was not sufficient to guarantee the rights of OLDER women. Thus it is essential that any future convention or human rights mechanism for older persons includes obligations for States to incorporate a gender perspective in their legislation and policy actions on ageing – AN OBLIGATION TO REINFORCE THE LIFE CYCLE APPROACH TO GENDER AND AGEING.

Conclusion

UN Women supports the development of this report because we strongly believe that older women are the ‘foundations on which our societies are built and sustained’. In our work on violence against women, peace and security, leadership and participation, and economic empowerment – UN Women will seek, as best as possible, to prioritize older women as both agents and beneficiaries of progress. In supporting governments with their national planning and budgeting, UN Women hopes to inject perspective, and where possible more, to ensure that the needs of older women are addressed and met fully.

We are particularly concerned with breaking the cycle of poverty and the cumulative effects of discrimination across a woman’s life that render her vulnerable to poverty and discrimination and violence and marginalization in old age – all states which she so little deserves, and which we cannot as a society and as human being ever accept. The life cycle approach presents a real opportunity to do this, because it increases the number of opportunities and intervention points from which we can change the lives of older women. *Maybe any one of us cannot intervene at all points, but surely at at least one of them we can – to start with that is a necessary but not sufficient condition. But we must do what we can, whether it implies raising awareness through formal advocacy or informal conversation, or dedicating our lives to this issue, as many here have. We must work to honor them and us, as we age, in fact with every passing moment.*

For these reasons we are delighted to have shared in the development of this report with so many of you, and we hope that its publication will mark a step change for gender and ageing – in which they are no longer seen as a ‘dual jeopardy’ and instead are considered ‘a more perfect union’.

ⁱ Strengthening Older People's Rights: towards a UN convention, pp4-5. Produced as part of a collaboration between: INPEA, IFA, ILC-US, IAGG, IAHSA, HelpAge International, GAA, Age UK, AARP (2010). Available at: www.inpea.net/images/Strengthening_Rights_2010.pdf