



## THE NGO COMMITTEE ON AGEING BUILDING A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES



### Welcome to the September 2022 Issue of the UN NGO Committee on Ageing/NY Newsletter

***Greetings from Cynthia Stuen, Committee Chair, and Martha Bial, Editor, Communications Subcommittee Chair***

Welcome back, and hoping you had time for some rest and relaxation. There is much work for us to do beginning this fall. We hope you will all celebrate the return of the in-person ***Celebration of the UN International Day of Older Persons*** at the United Nations on October 3 from 10:00am-noon EDT.

This year's theme is, ***"The Resilience of Older Persons in a Changing World, Highlighting the Contributions of Older Women."*** UNIDOP is a **free event. Registration BY SEPTEMBER 23 is required!** Please register **RIGHT NOW** for in-person attendance or online viewing by [clicking on this link](#). If you miss the registration date, you can watch it live on [webtv.un.org](http://webtv.un.org). BUT...we need to show a STRONG response, and only registrants will be counted to demonstrate the importance of UNIDOP to all of us.

[Download the flyer here...](#)

**UN NGO Committee on Ageing/NY** collaborates with the **Committees on Ageing in Vienna and Geneva**. Their observances of UNIDOP, are as follows:

- September 30, Geneva will observe in person focusing on the theme: ***Older Persons as Active Agents in a Changing Climate***. Visit <https://ageingcommitteegeneva.org>
- October 3, Vienna will also focus on ***Resilience of Older Women***, which takes place live and virtual. Visit [www.ngoageingvie.org](http://www.ngoageingvie.org).

One of the major goals of the Committee on Ageing has been to work toward a legally binding document (convention) on the human rights of older persons, and there are many positive signs of recognition and support. At the UNECE 4th Review of MIPPA in Rome, there was strong support raised not only by civil society but also by participating member states. On 29-30 August, the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights convened a live and virtual ***Multi-stakeholder Meeting on the Human Rights of Older Persons***.

It addressed the limitations and gaps of selected human rights norms and obligations, the inadequacy of existing human rights mechanisms, and how to improve coordinated actions and strengthen the protection of the human

rights of older persons. Our team within the United States is working hard to educate and harness efforts to support the human rights of older persons.

In anticipation of UNIDOP, two articles in this issue are of special interest.

**Maud About** describes the resilience of older women who overcome external challenges--even disasters-- along with lifelong gendered economic and educational disadvantages to hold their families together and take leadership positions in their communities and beyond.

**Adriane Berg** asks us to rethink the term "older women" using a human rights lens (***Words that are Trending***).

Also, in this issue, we are pleased to post a guest editorial by climate scientist **Gary Haq** on the sometimes-invisible contributions of older persons to climate action.

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## **Older People and Climate Change: From Climate Culprits and Causalities to Climate Champions**

**Gary Haq** is a Senior Research Associate at the Stockholm Environment Institute at the University of York, York, UK



The climate is changing. From scorching heatwaves to devastating flooding and blazing wildfires, climate-related extreme weather events are being experienced across the globe.

As I write, in Pakistan, a 'monster monsoon' is affecting over 30 million people, destroying homes and livelihoods.

If we are to avoid runaway climate change, immediate and deep emissions reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, such as carbon dioxide, are needed to keep global heating to the safe limit of 1.5°C.

Older people are often presented as 'victims' of climate change, as they are vulnerable to extreme weather events because of ill health, immobility, fixed incomes, and lack of social support networks. Gender, race, and disability are additional factors that can affect vulnerability. For example, about 20 percent of people most vulnerable to climate change are persons with disabilities, yet we rarely include them in climate action.

There is no doubt people need to reach old age with resilience if they are to cope with future climate change. We could achieve this by developing age-friendly cities and providing climate-proof infrastructure and support services. Yet, to view older people only as potential causalities of climate change ignores the contribution they make to the problem and the role they can play in climate action.

In developed countries, the lifestyle choices of older people make a substantial contribution to GHG emissions. A study of the GHG footprint of household consumption across age groups in 32 developed countries found the

contribution of older people to national GHG emissions increased from 25 percent to 33 percent between 2005 and 2015. Seniors in the United States and Australia have the highest footprint per head, twice the Western average. This trend is because of changes in expenditure patterns of seniors, especially on home energy and transport.

Climate activist Greta Thunberg claims, “young people are being let down by old people and those in power.” Young activists have been accused of adopting an intergenerational unfairness narrative, blaming older people for overconsumption and climate inaction. While we may see climate-conscious behaviours as the domain of the young, this is not the case.

For example, while younger generations in the U.S. are more likely to say that climate change is very or extremely dangerous, there is no significant difference between older groups. Older persons have been invisible to the climate debate compared to younger generations.

However, they offer an invaluable resource in climate action. An ageing society is producing an increasing number of retired, educated, active people who are living longer and who have different economic and social resources. Older persons often give financial support to family and their community through informal work and contribute to decision-making and conflict resolution. They have voting and economic power, which can be mobilized for effective climate policy.

Older persons possess a traditional knowledge of the local environment, its vulnerabilities, and how the community has responded in the past. This allows them to play a key role in adapting to and reducing the negative impact of climate-related disasters.

In addition, the concept of legacy motivates many older people. This involves leaving behind attitudes, values, and an intact world for future generations. Leaving an environmental legacy can be a motivation for older persons to contribute to climate action and protect the environment for future generations to enjoy.

Engaging and empowering older people in climate action not only provides an opportunity to address the climate emergency but can contribute to building local community resilience.

This may require removing barriers such as lack of knowledge, information technology, inaccessible building to mobilize their potential. Several initiatives involving older people already exist, such as the global groups The Elders and Senior Environment Corps, the U.S. Elders for Climate Action, and Canadian Seniors for Climate Action.

Rather than being climate casualties or climate culprits, older people provide an immense untapped resource for climate action. Their knowledge and experience can be mobilized to complement the activism of younger people. This contributes to intergenerational solidarity in the climate movement for the benefit of everyone.



## of Older Women in these Challenging Times

**Maud Bruce-About**, Executive Committee, NGO Committee on Ageing/NY

This article will contextualize the situation of older women and encourage you to reflect on the contributions and resilience of older women in these challenging times—Covid, war, climate, and technological change—in view of the upcoming United Nations International Day of Older Persons (UNIDOP).

You certainly know that the world is ageing rapidly. Life expectancy at birth is 73 today, although it varies between affluent and deprived areas within and between countries, from 54 in Lesotho to 85 in Japan. It is set to rise to 77 in 2050 when [one in six people will be 65+](#).

What you might not know is that women make up most older persons, especially at advanced ages; in 2019, there were 63 men for 100 women above 80.

### **First, let us contextualize or set the scene.**

For starters, resilience and the contributions of individuals to society are - as pointed out in our [April 2022](#) newsletter- contingent on the supportiveness of cultural and socio-economic environments. In other words, a minimum is required to have the capacity to "absorb, adapt and transform in the face of shocks and stressors," as the [Word Food Program defines resilience](#).

Today, many older women live in environments that have not met/do not meet their needs (health, education, social protection), or suffer from man-made (war) or natural catastrophes.

Currently, as pointed out in our [February 2022](#) newsletter, the risks of adverse events - linked to globalization, technology, climate change, and pandemics - are on the increase, whereas people's ability to cope and recover has not followed suit.

For instance, Covid-19 has fragilised those already poor and increased their numbers, making 1.3 billion persons live in multidimensional poverty.

And while before Covid-19, two billion persons did not access safe, nutritious, and sufficient food, and three billion could not afford healthy diets, in [2020, 720 to 811 million people faced hunger](#).

Unfortunately, while Covid-19 has confirmed that strong universal health systems and policies underpin both health and financial security and resilience, many of the countries where the number of older persons grows the fastest do not have solid systems in place. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, less than 25% of those eligible receive a pension, and older women are

exposed to exclusion/limitations in access to social security, financial resources, property ownership, and inheritance rights.

As pointed out in our [June 2022](#) newsletter- an older woman is only an aged version of her younger self with the inequalities and discriminations that have compounded throughout life. There is a need to [eradicate gender bias](#), discrimination, and other inequalities from an early age and throughout the life continuum.

In our gendered world, women contribute more than 50 % of the food produced worldwide and account for 70% of the world's hungry. [In parts of the world, twice as many women suffer from malnutrition than men.](#)

Furthermore, 27 % of women over 65 worldwide lack basic literacy skills (independent experts), and they are also especially affected by the digital gender divide. In Africa - the continent with the largest digital gender gap - [only 22.5% of women use the internet, compared to 33.8% of men.](#)

Then again, even in the most privileged economic and natural environments, ageism or discrimination stymie both contributions and resilience. According to the *WHO Global Report on Ageism*, one in two people is ageist. Ageist attitudes disadvantage older women more than men—men are seen as wise and experienced, [whereas women face pressures to hide the physical signs of the ageing process.](#) Ageism - be it institutional, interpersonal, or self-directed - can lead to social isolation, [bad health, and death.](#)

In the labour market, 13.2% of women work after 65 globally, and this increases to 33.4% in low-income countries. Older women tend to work in part-time, precarious, and informal jobs; adapt their careers with care responsibilities; abandon their employment before retirement age; and face aggravated [gender inequalities as they age.](#)

Hence, at retirement—when available, as women constitute 65% of the 33% globally that do not receive any pension at all—women are disadvantaged as current pensions systems are inefficient. Contributory systems and private pensions schemes favour continuous, full-time employment and older migrants cannot obtain their benefits with employment spread geographically.

Consequently, the EU's average gender pension gap is 37.2%, more than twice the gender pay gap of 14.1%.

Given the inequalities and disadvantages accumulated throughout life—exacerbated by inter- sectionalities and status as divorced, widowed, or unmarried—older women are more likely to live in poverty than men. According to EU 2019 statistics, 23% of women [75+ live in poverty or social exclusion.](#) And in parts of the world, older women without children or grandchildren run the risk of accusations of witchcraft, violence, and banishment from their homes.

With the scene set—helping us understand the gendered and diverse situation of older women —we can turn to the risks run by women in these times of turmoil and their contribution and resilience.

Research on emergency situations concludes that [older persons are disproportionately affected.](#) The same research mostly neglects the specific risks and impacts on older women - e.g., during Covid-19, sex and gender disaggregated data was missing.

Today, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that in times of armed conflict, like the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, older women, with limited mobility, have been victims of HR violations. Lonely older women are at risk of becoming dependent or getting abused and may have trouble accessing information and services.

We cannot neglect that older persons - especially women - are invisible in the media covering the humanitarian crisis. A Google news search concluded that 97% of all Ukrainian-headlined articles mentioned children while merely 3% mentioned older persons, and [only 33% of the latter mentioned older women.](#)

If not invisible, older women are frequently depicted as a burden, making them vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

However, despite this reserve, we should not overlook that many older women hold leadership positions in local and national politics; business; culture; civil society; and academia, and that many older women continue to be active in organizations fighting social injustice or working towards a more sustainable world. These individuals contribute to socio-economic and cultural development, break stereotypes, and constitute important role models for women of all generations. As the glass ceiling breaks, the number of them will increase. To highlight this evolution, the U.S. business magazine **Forbes** recently launched a "50 over 50" power list of [women with "later in life" professional breakthroughs.](#)

**Obviously, we must not forget that we older women who are not mediated public persons are all heroes at our level, contributing as we can culturally, socially, and economically, and being resilient.**

As pointed out in our April 2022 newsletter, older persons - many of whom are women - perform unpaid work, like informal caregiving that is not currently accounted for in national statistics. In the U.S., individuals 50+ contributed unpaid activities - grandchild and adult care, volunteering, and charity work - worth \$745 billion in 2018. In Sub-Saharan Africa, grandmothers tended to grandchildren following the HIV crisis, and likewise, in Kenya, grandparents tended to their grandchildren in pastoralist communities that their [children have fled due to current droughts and famine.](#)

Furthermore, older adults who are able share pensions and savings with family members for subsistence and to help the next generation.

Given current economic insecurity and a plunge in purchasing power, the older person has also shown resilience in going back to work. "Carefully laid retirement plans, which looked economically sustainable a year ago, are now shot to pieces..." according to [Age UK.](#)

While these contributions are mainly economic, the value of older medical professionals coming out of retirement in solidarity during Covid-19, and older women's potential role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution "as carriers of pre-conflict narratives and experiences of shared living" is also valuable.

If, after this read, you feel the need for more convincing or simply feel very inspired and cannot wait to learn more at New York UNIDOP, do not hesitate to view the recording of a recent OEWG (**Open Ended Working Group on Ageing**) side event [Older Women Rock the World: The Right to Participation and Those Who Make It Happen.](#)

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## Words That Are Trending: Older Women: In Search of a Human Rights Definition

**Adriane Berg**, Sub-committee on  
Communications, NGO Committee on  
Ageing/NY



Today we are at a tipping point regarding the narrative around the term "older women," which is causing confusion and prevarication over the need to guarantee equity and rights officially.

*Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus** and later works asserts that the meaning of a word can only be taken from its use. In current usage, we have conflated a noun (women) and an adjective (older) and expressed it as a single concept, open to interpretation and conflicting use. As such, the term has not captured the hearts and minds of humanitarians, policymakers, and lawmakers, as have phrases like "the rights of the disabled" or "the rights of children."*

According to The [National Association of Baby Boomer Women](#), older women in the US comprise 38 million of the "healthiest, wealthiest, and best-educated generation of women in US history." The 2020 report by [World's Women](#), "The reality of aging itself is not even constant. Thanks to medical advances, improved nutrition, and less demanding lifestyles, 65-year-olds in most countries can expect not only longer lives but [more years in good health](#) than their parents or grandparents."

From Maye Musk, the 74-year-old model featured on the cover of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit issue, to female heads of state like 75-year-old [Sheikh Hasina](#), Prime Minister of Bangladesh, 64-year-old Prime Minister of Tunisia [Najla Bouden](#), and the US's 82-year-old Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, along with dozens of others world leaders, older women seem to be making enormous headway.

But contrast these powerful "older women" with older women begging in the streets for food in India and Pakistan, abandoned by their families as they are too costly to support. The plight of these older women is graphically described by Barbara Crossette, calling for more action to actualize The United Nations Sustainable Goals agenda, which highlights the rights of older women worldwide. [Action to Protect Older Women's Rights Has Stalled in the UN General Assembly \(2020.\)](#) See also, [Older Women Rock the World: The Right to Participation and Those Who Make It Happen](#) (OEWG-12 Side Event) April 12, 2022.

Indeed, progress in official recognition of the rights of older women, such as through a Convention, is slow. [The World's Women 2020: Trends and Statistics](#) summarize the absence of progress in the rights of older women after 25 years since the adoption of the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#).

- Illiteracy is a major issue for older women. Older women who cannot read or write did not become illiterate as they aged. They never received

schooling when they were children. According to [UN Women](#), the inequality **gender gap** starts at birth and continues for a lifetime with lower pay, fewer economic rights, and lack of education.

- **The gender wage gap** "is estimated to be 23 percent. This means that women earn 77 percent of what men earn...Women also face the [motherhood wage penalty](#), which increases as the number of children a woman has increases."
- **A third of women's work globally is in agriculture** in poorer countries, making work harder to sustain as they age because it requires intense physical labor.
- **Violence and harassment at work affect women regardless of age, location, income, or social status.** The economic costs to the global economy of discriminatory social institutions and violence against women are estimated to be approximately [USD 12 trillion annually](#).
- **Even at the highest levels, women face discrimination.** According to a 2020 report of [World's Women](#), women "held only 28 percent of managerial positions globally in 2019 – almost the same proportion as in 1995. Among Fortune 500 corporations, only 7.4 percent, or 37 Chief Executive Officers, were women."
- The dependency ratio, the "distribution between working age versus young and old (dependent) populations," is a matter of how long women work and if they are allowed to be gainfully employed. **Age Structure, [International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis](#).**

**We must develop a new use case for the term older women, reflecting a societal obligation rather than an individual description.**

In her February 2022 report, [Supriya Akerkar writing for the Programme and Ageing Unit \(PAU\), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(UN DESA\), New York](#), concludes, "Developing diverse gendered understanding of aging needs sensitive methodologies that can capture the lived diverse experiences of older women...over their life course. A new methodological framework ... can be useful to uncover gendered ageing as a process, and to uncover diverse lived realities of older women..."

**Social philosophy, not semantics, must give meaning to the term "older women."** If we are to make sincere progress regarding what has already been stated as a United Nations goal-defining and protecting the rights of older women, it is time to acknowledge that we know who we mean, what we mean, what needs to be done, and how to make it so.

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**Catch Up on What You Missed  
Since Our Last Newsletter**



**#1. UNIDOP is Coming: REGISTER NOW!**

**United Nations International Day of Older Persons Celebration: "The Resilience and Contributions of Older Women" UNIDOP is a free event. Registration is required.** You can register for in-person attendance or online viewing by [clicking on this link](#). [Download the flyer here...](#)

**#2. The Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People** (GAROP) met on September 7, 2022, at 09:30-10:30 EDT (15:30-16:30 CET), for a debriefing on the Multistakeholder Meeting that was held on 29-30 August 2022.

**#3. Here is what occurred at the MULTISTAKEHOLDER MEETING, 29-30 AUGUST 2022!!!**

The Human Rights Council, in its resolution 48/3, requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights:

- To prepare a report on normative standards and obligations under international law in relation to the promotion and protection of the human rights of older persons; and
- To convene a multi-stakeholder meeting, with the participation of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, human rights experts and expert representatives of Member States, the treaty bodies and the special procedures regional mechanisms, the United Nations system, academia, national human rights institutions, and civil society, including with the meaningful and effective participation of older persons and of persons of different ages, to discuss the report and to prepare a summary with conclusions of the meeting that includes recommendations on addressing possible gaps and the dispersiveness of international human rights law concerning older persons and to submit the report to the Human Rights Council by its fifty-first session.
- More information: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/events/meetings/2022/multi-stakeholder-meeting-human-rights-older-persons>

[More information about the meeting, including a concept note/programme and background documents, can be found here.](#)

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To discover more about how you can be part of the dialogue and the solutions, visit [ngocoa-ny.org/participate](https://ngocoa-ny.org/participate)

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