



Ms Sima Bahous  
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Geneva, 26 October 2021

Dear Under-Secretary General and Executive Director Bahous,

We would like to express our congratulations and best wishes on your new appointment as Executive Director of UN Women.

We appreciate your letter to civil society, recognizing and acknowledging the critical role it plays in supporting gender equality and the important work of UN Women. We, in turn, appreciate your continued commitment to collaborating with civil society in our common endeavours. We are, at the same time, extremely concerned that you have omitted to specifically mention older women and we call your urgent attention to the issues we are raising below.

We believe that UN WOMEN should develop an in-depth analysis on gender and ageing and the impact of gender norms and roles in the realities and experiences of older people. UNWOMEN should address the "bigger picture", and in this connection we would strongly recommend referencing the **megatrends** requiring global attention, particularly as the UN Secretary-General would describe, population ageing is one of the main megatrends. The world is ageing at a fast pace and women live longer than men. "Virtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in the size and proportion of older persons in their population", according to the United Nations Population Division's Report on World Population Ageing 2019. Older women should be an explicit, visible target audience of your strategic direction and programs.

We would urge you to consider the following:

1. **First and foremost, that UN WOMEN take a life-course approach**, to leave no one behind. Women globally, and especially in developing countries, often suffer a lifetime of discrimination, such as lack of education which impacts their ability to join the formal labour market, lack of adequate health care services or social security. The intersections with age and the accumulation of the different forms of discrimination across the life course, result in particular disadvantages to older women. Ignoring attention and services that should be provided to women as they get older equals ageism. Gender equality does not end with reproductive age.

2. **Meaningful data:** There is an urgent need for collecting and analyzing disaggregated data on gender and age to provide a full understanding of the lived realities and experiences of older women and men.
3. **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR),** as women grow older, they experience a range of health conditions linked to reproductive and sexual health - from ageing with fistula, to cervical, ovarian and breast cancers, menopause, hormonal changes that contribute to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis and mental health issues, among others. They may have to undergo mastectomies or hysterectomies and may be denied access to adequate health services. Women's health should not be focused just on reproductive age. Older women may not reproduce but they do have reproductive health needs and they remain very productive in society. Older women may also be sexually active and in need of sexual health services. HIV infections among older people are on the rise and yet, they are overlooked due to ageist stereotypes. A focus on women's health must take a life-course approach and include older women.
4. **Ending gender-based violence** - Violence against women, regrettably, does not disappear beyond reproductive age. Ageist stereotypes must be challenged. Elder abuse by different perpetrators, including health care workers, family, and other caregivers, is rampant throughout the world. Violence, abuse and neglect of older women must be addressed. In all settings and particularly in humanitarian settings, age is not a protection from GBV and rape. SDG 5 dropped the upper age caps. Data on gender-based violence must be collected, analyzed and adequately applied in programmes beyond the age of 49.
5. **Harmful Practices** - Female genital mutilation (FGM) will never be eliminated unless older women are seen as part of the solution. For that, older women need to understand they also have rights and receive the appropriate capacity building and training. Older women are also subject to deadly harmful practices such as widowhood rites, accusations of witchcraft, burning and ejection from their land.
6. **COVID-19 pandemic** - the devastating impact on older persons and persons with disabilities cannot be ignored. Among women who died from COVID-19, 87 per cent were aged 60 and over. The tragically large number of fatalities could have been reduced had appropriate services been in place and older people's rights been protected. Older persons are among the first victims of all humanitarian crises and older women suffer the impact of the pandemic in multiple ways
7. **Leaving no one behind** - this must be inclusive of ALL women groups that have heretofore been left behind – older women, women with disabilities, indigenous women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQI, migrants, women of African descent, etc. There is no excuse to leave any group behind.



8. We recommend that UN WOMEN reference the United Nations **Decade of Healthy Ageing**, the **Global Report on Ageism** that was co-signed by the Principals of WHO, OHCHR, DESA and UNFPA, and the reports of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, including her recent report **A/76/157** on [Human rights of older women: the intersection between ageing and gender](#) presented to the 76<sup>th</sup> UN GA.

While we understand that UN WOMEN is a member of the UN Inter-Agency Group on Ageing, it has not yet taken a comprehensive approach to the needs and rights of older women in its programmes and statements.

Finally, we urge you, in your leadership role, to demonstrate your personal commitment and ensure that older women are fully included in the much-needed work of UN WOMEN.

We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Silvia Perel-Levin, Chair of the NGO Committee on Ageing, Geneva  
Cynthia Stuen, Chair of the NGO Committee on Ageing, New York  
Jacqueline Stark, Chair of the NGO Committee on Ageing, Vienna