

Between Gender and Ageing
The Status of the World's Older Women and Progress
Since the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing

UN Women Coordination Division
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Executive Summary

This report was prepared as part of UN Women's collaboration on The State of the World's Older Persons 2012 report and as an important contribution to the Madrid+10 Review. The report aims to position gender and ageing within the global development agenda and raise awareness about the experience of older women worldwide. We endeavour to describe progress made in the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing agreed to at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002 by showcasing good practices, identifying gaps and making recommendations for the way forward.

1. Women make up a significantly larger share of the older population

From ages 50 and over, women across the world make up a bigger proportion of the population, with their share of the population increasing in every age group thereafter. The numbers are staggering, with as many as 18 countries in Europe having less than 2 men for every 5 women aged 80 or over. Though the proportion of older women is higher in these more developed regions, women constitute a larger share of the older population in less developed regions too and this trend is expected to increase by 2050. Therefore, whilst we can expect to see a greater number of men per 100 women by 2050, women will continue to make up a larger share of the population aged 60 and over.

2. Older women experience some of the lowest literacy rates in the world

The substantial gains that have been made in closing the gender gap in education worldwide have broadly left older women behind. Average levels of illiteracy for women aged 65 or over are as high as 78% in Africa and 53% in Asia, compared to 58% and 29% respectively for men in these regions. Even in developed regions, such as southern Europe, individual countries continue to record high levels of illiteracy for older women, in particular older women in rural areas and those of indigenous ethnic origin. This seriously impacts upon the lives of older women, preventing them from accessing health services, securing incomes and moving out of

poverty. This should be of great concern to policy-makers given the increasing need for higher literacy levels in the labour force, owing to the decline in low-skill and manual jobs.

3. Gender is a powerful determinant of health and older women suffer significant inequities in health

The fact that women's life expectancy is greater than men's means that health problems that increase with age, such as disability, affect a greater number of women worldwide. It is anticipated that the overall prevalence and severity of disability among older women will continue to increase, in line with the growing ageing population and the higher proportion of elderly women in the oldest age groups. For example, older women are more likely to suffer from blindness than older men, especially in low-income countries where 44% of cases are caused by cataracts which can be cured at relatively low cost. There is a particular need to improve the affordability and accessibility of healthcare, which is often contingent on insurance schemes that stipulate employment in the formal sector, rendering many women ineligible.

4. The different working patterns that many women pursue can render them less financially secure than men in old age

Women's participation in the labour market is lower than men's at every stage, and the gender gap is greatest between ages 50 and 64 years. Ultimately, the different working patterns that many women pursue can render them less financially secure than men in old age. Part-time work and the option to take time off are essential in enabling women to provide care, but women must not be penalized for their domestic contributions in old age. The contributions that many women make throughout their lifetime in caring and domestic roles lessen the demands on state and society, and benefit family and society alike. Therefore, policies should aim to recognize the role that women play in caring for others and performing domestic duties, without reinforcing age or gender discrimination and stereotypes.

5. The cumulative effect of gender and age discrimination renders many older women vulnerable to poverty

Inequalities in income, education, and employment across the life-cycle expose many women to poverty in old age, exacerbated by limitations on pension entitlements and lack of control over financial resources. Older women are also less likely to be married than older men, are less likely to remarry than older men, and are less likely to be outlived by their male spouses. As the status of women in many societies is linked to having a husband, widows are particularly vulnerable to poverty. It is not merely the loss of additional income that affects female-headed households, but also the differential impact of poverty on women and the gendered responses to poverty within households. The number of older women living in rural areas in 2005 has also

increased for every age group, where they often suffer a severe lack of basic resources for subsistence, income security, and access to healthcare.

6. Older women have not benefited equally from the progress that has been made in tackling violence and abuse, often failing to be accounted for in both gender and ageing research and policies in this area.

Despite increased awareness of abuse, discrimination and violence against women, concerns over the situation of older women have largely been ignored. Data on violence against women over the age of 49, for example, is severely limited and research focusing on abuse of older women tends to be confined to developed countries and based on small sample sizes. Lower and more variable levels of reported domestic violence amongst older women is a consequence of poor diagnosis by professionals, confusion over the distinction between domestic violence and elder abuse, varied methodologies and definitions, a lack of consensus on methods of validation for abuse, and under-reporting by older women. Together, these point to the fact that work on abuse and violence against older women is in the very early stages, and a great deal remains to be done before the situation can be properly assessed and responded to.

10 Recommendations to Improve the Quality of Life for Older Women

Overarching Recommendations

1. Improve data on the interactions between gender and ageing
2. Reinforce and Protect the Human Rights of Older Women
3. Ensure that gender is mainstreamed into ageing policies, and ageing is mainstreamed into gender policies

Specific Recommendations

4. Ensure compensation for variable participation in the labour force
5. Support a lifelong learning approach to education
6. Set gender-specific, measurable targets for improvements the health status of older people
7. Support better engagement with, and empowerment of, older women
8. Take urgent, coordinated action to improve research and policy responses to elder abuse, with specific regard to the needs of older women

9. Strengthen social networks and community support for older women living alone
10. Prioritize the needs of rural older women in public policy