

## **Follow-up to the Second World Assembly on Ageing Inputs to the Secretary-General's report, pursuant to GA resolution 65/182**

The resolution clearly draws attention to the need to address the gender dimensions of ageing. It highlights the need to build capacity to eradicate poverty among older persons, in particular older women, by mainstreaming ageing issues into poverty eradication strategies and national development plans, and to include both ageing-specific policies and ageing-mainstreaming efforts in their national strategies. It draws attention to the need to ensure, as appropriate, conditions that enable families and communities to provide care and protection to persons as they age, and to evaluate improvement in the health status of older persons, including on a gender-specific basis, and to reduce disability and mortality. It calls upon Member States to strengthen and incorporate a gender perspective into all policy actions on ageing, as well as to eliminate and address discrimination on the basis of age and gender, and recommends that Member States engage with all sectors of society, including women's groups and organizations of older persons, in changing negative stereotypes about older persons, in particular older women, and promote positive images of older persons.

As the report in response to GA resolution 65/182 is under preparation, the opportunity should be fully used to elaborate on the gender perspectives in regard to the broad range of issues flagged in the resolution. The report should highlight where Member States and other stakeholders provide gender-specific information about their follow-up actions, as well as identify gaps where such information is lacking as those information gaps may be indicative of lack of gender-specific follow-up actions.

Recommendations should subsequently reiterate the need for visibly integrating gender perspectives in all follow-up activities to the Second World Assembly on Ageing. Recommendations should identify opportunities in specific legislative, policy, strategy and programme areas for addressing gender-based inequality and discrimination against older women so that: such policies do not perpetuate existing discrimination; do not reinforce existing discrimination; but rather actively contribute towards eliminating and overcoming discrimination against older women.

### **Background information and analysis**

The 2009 World Population Ageing Report notes that because women live longer than men, women constitute the majority of older persons. Women outnumber men by an estimated 66 million among those aged 60 years or over. Among those aged 80 years or over, women are nearly twice as numerous as men, and among centenarians women are between four and five times as numerous as men. Older persons living alone are at greater risk of experiencing social isolation and economic deprivation, and may therefore require special support. Because of higher survivorship and lower propensities to remarry, older women are much less likely than older men to be currently married, and older women are also more likely to live alone. Globally, 80 per cent of men aged 60 years or over but under half of women in that age group are living with a spouse. An

estimated 19 per cent of older women live alone, whereas just 9 per cent of older men do. It is estimated that nearly half of all persons aged 65 or over in developing countries are illiterate. Only about 40 per cent of older women and about two thirds of older men in developing countries have basic reading and writing skills. (See *World Population Ageing 2009*, United Nations 2010).

Older women face inequalities as a result of their gender-based roles in society. Gender relations structure the entire life cycle, from birth to old age, influencing access to resources and opportunities and shaping life choices at every stage. The relevance of gender is both ongoing and cumulative—the different circumstances that shape the lives of women and men in old age are the outcome of the many different opportunities, challenges and constraints of a person’s earlier years. Good health, economic security, adequate housing—these are fundamentals of ageing with dignity; yet achieving them depends on decisions and choices only partly determined by each individual. The impact of gender differences and inequalities in education and employment opportunities increases through every stage of an individual life, becoming most pronounced in old age. As a result, older women are more likely than older men to be poor.

Men and women suffer different health problems as they age, and women’s lack of access to adequate care is sharpened by their higher levels of poverty. Healthy ageing also depends upon women’s and men’s attitudes towards themselves and what they are entitled to as parents, community elders or citizens. In most societies, this too is shaped by gender relations: whether people think of themselves as useless burdens or valuable assets reflects social attitudes towards the roles of women and men, what they can give to society and what they deserve in return.

Attitudes, like opportunities, are also shaped by many other dimensions that define identity in different societies— including race and ethnicity, religion, disability and, especially, class and wealth. Media magnify these, and the images projected of older women.

As the population age structure shifts, the population of older people will increase in proportion to that of younger people, especially those of “working age”. This shift has profound policy implications—for pension and income support, for job creation and employment, for health and elder-care systems and for economic growth and development in every country. Policies to address these issues, if they are to be effective, must be informed by an understanding that women and men experience old age very differently. Older women, especially if they are poor or disabled, immigrants or members of a non-majority racial, ethnic or religious group, commonly lack the resources and influence that determine social policies. (Analysis from: *Gender dimensions of Ageing. Women 2000*, March 2002, DESA)

The abuse of older women may become more prevalent with changing demographics. Older women are subject to particular forms and manifestations of violence. Violence against older women may take the form of physical, sexual or

psychological abuse, as well as financial exploitation or neglect, which can be perpetrated by family members or other caregivers. (See A/61/122, para 150, In-depth Study of the Secretary-General on violence against women).

Many older women in developing countries live in extreme poverty and exclusion, especially in rural areas. Poor economic and health conditions, changes in traditional family support structures and elder-abuse increase the vulnerability of women. In many countries, older women increasingly act as caregivers for their adult children infected with HIV/AIDS as well as for their orphaned grandchildren, despite the fact that they often face extreme poverty, isolation and abandonment. Measures such as social protection initiatives, such as cash transfers and agricultural input subsidy programmes targeted at older, vulnerable people, including women in the rural areas, farmers' pension schemes and health-care services in rural villages are important in addressing such challenges.

Older women's contributions to the well-being of their families, communities and societies are often overlooked. Their contributions as caregivers—for example, to grandchildren orphaned by HIV/AIDS—are often overlooked and underpaid, if paid at all.

Government agencies and legislatures that carry out the research and analyses on which laws and policies are developed thus need to understand and address the realities of both older women's and men's lives.

### **Steps taken by the Commission on the Status of Women**

The Commission on the Status of Women has highlighted the role of older women in regard to a number of areas.

#### **a. The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS**

In its agreed conclusions on the priority theme of 2009, the Commission called on Governments and all other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate, to:

- (kk) Develop multisectoral policies and programmes and identify, strengthen and take all necessary measures to address the needs of women and girls, including older women and widows, infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS, and those providing unpaid care, especially women and girls heading households, for, inter alia, social and legal protection, increased access to financial and economic resources including microcredit and sustainable economic opportunities, education including opportunities to continue education, as well as access to health services, including affordable antiretroviral treatment, and nutritional support; (E/2009/27, Chapter I.A.)

**b. Women, the girl child and HIV and AIDS**

In its annual resolution on the above-mentioned topic, the Commission regularly has called for attention to the challenges faced by older women.

6. *Urges* Governments and other relevant stakeholders to address the challenges faced by older women in accessing HIV prevention, treatment, care and support, as well as in caring for people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS, including orphaned children in vulnerable situations;

**c. Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals**

In its high-level round table on the above-mentioned topic in 2010, the Moderator's Summary highlighted the attention given to older women by the participants, as follows:

18. Patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society continue to reinforce inequality. Discriminatory customs and traditions undermine progress in many areas, including women's access to resources. Participants noted the importance of innovative ways to engage community leaders in efforts to eliminate practices and customs that discriminate against women. In the design, planning and monitoring of laws, policies and programmes to achieve gender equality, it is important to address fully the multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization that particular groups of women continue to face, in particular rural, indigenous and older women, women belonging to ethnic minorities and women with disabilities. (E/2010/27, Decision 54/101)

**Steps taken by the General Assembly**

The General Assembly has highlighted the situation of older women in its work on gender equality.

**a. The situation of women in rural areas (A/RES/64/140)**

(pp) Recognizing the contributions of older rural women to the family and the community, especially in cases where they are left behind by migrating adults or as a result of other socio-economic factors to assume childcare, household and agricultural responsibility,

(pp) Recognizing the urgent need to take appropriate measures aimed at further improving the situation of women in rural areas

2. *Urges* Member States, in collaboration with the organizations of the United Nations and civil society, as appropriate, to continue their efforts to implement the outcome of and to ensure an integrated and coordinated follow-up to the United Nations conferences and summits, including their reviews, and to attach greater importance to the improvement of the situation of rural women, including indigenous women, in their national, regional and global development strategies by, inter alia:

2. (i) Ensuring that the rights of older women in rural areas are taken into account with regard to their equal access to basic social services, appropriate social protection/social security measures, equal access to and control of economic resources, and empowerment of older women through access to financial and infrastructure services, with special focus on support to older women, including indigenous women, who often have access to few resources and are more vulnerable;

**b. International Widow's Day (A/RES/65/189)**

In December 2010, the General Assembly declared 23 June as International Widow's Day

1. Decides, with effect from 2011, to observe International Widows' Day on 23 June each year;

2. Calls upon Member States, the United Nations system and other international and regional organizations, within their respective mandates, to give special attention to the situation of widows and their children;