



IN BRIEF



# GENDER, AGE AND DISABILITY: ADDRESSING THE INTERSECTION

Photo: UN Women

## Introduction

Older women including those with disabilities contribute to formal and informal economies as well as within families. Almost everywhere on average women live longer than men.<sup>1</sup> Older women in 2020 accounted for 55 per cent of the global population aged 65 years or over.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the proportion of women in almost all populations increases with age: currently older women constitute approximately 62 per cent of those 80 years or more of age.<sup>3</sup> Although people who are aging often do not think of themselves as having a disability, physical or mental impairment, that substantially limits a major life activity means a person has a disability. Further, at any given moment, approximately 10- 15 per cent of any population is understood to possess or experience disability.<sup>4</sup> This proportion steadily increases with cohorts of increasing age.

Older women face discrimination, bias, and marginalization, as recognized by the General Recommendation Number 27 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against women (CEDAW), also known popularly as the Bill of Rights of Women.<sup>5</sup> This discrimination, bias and marginalization is only further compounded for older women with disabilities.

They are systematically overlooked and underrepresented in development policies, programmes, initiatives, legislation, as well as humanitarian efforts. Moreover, gender inequality, ageism and ableism are further exacerbated by other forms of discrimination on the basis

of race, ethnicity, caste, religion, migration status among other factors.<sup>6</sup> Promoting and protecting the rights and dignity of older women with disabilities and ensuring their full and equal participation in society is therefore an integral part of the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its principle of Leave No One Behind (LNOB).<sup>7</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened the situation of older women with disabilities.<sup>8</sup> As the pandemic deepens, gender-based violence is increasing exponentially in many societies.<sup>9</sup> Older women are unfortunately neither exempt nor less affected.<sup>10</sup> In fact, anecdotal data suggests because of their general vulnerabilities, older women and women with disabilities experience these unacceptable behaviors in greater degrees.

As countries recover from the impact of the pandemic, the promise of LNOB is now more important than ever.<sup>11</sup> More broadly, the 2030 Agenda provides a critical platform for Member States and other stakeholders to address the intersections of gender inequality, age, and disability.

This brief seeks to raise awareness regarding the situation of older women with disabilities and provides a set of recommendations for actions that stakeholders might consider and implement.

*This brief is part of the UN Women series of briefs that address issues related to the empowerment of women and girls with disabilities.*

## What is the issue?

Given that older women with disabilities face intersecting forms of discrimination, bias and marginalization the intersection of gender, age and disability is particularly important to examine.

Many older persons, including women, may not self-identify as persons with disabilities despite experiencing difficulties in functioning and participating in daily and communal life. Yet, the discrimination against and marginalization of older persons with disabilities, particularly older women, permeates the different aspects of life.

Due to a lifetime of cumulative discrimination and inequalities, older women in general find themselves with fewer savings and assets, often insufficient to maintain an adequate standard of living.<sup>12</sup> Their dependence on family members for their daily survival and care makes them especially vulnerable, including to abuse. According to WHO, close to one in six older adults have experienced elder abuse in a community setting in the past year, and abuse in institutions is just as prevalent.<sup>13</sup> Access to social protection for older women with disabilities is therefore critical. The CRPD Committee has recommended that States adopt affirmative action measures to ensure equal opportunities for women with disabilities regarding social protection.<sup>14</sup>

Older women with disabilities also often experience discrimination and human rights violations due to the combined effect on ageism and ableism and associated with the bias that sees older persons and persons with disabilities as naturally deserving less rights and agency.<sup>15</sup> They face discriminatory laws, denial of legal recourse and institutionalization.<sup>16</sup> While joint data on the triple identities of gender, ageing and disability is unavailable, broadly speaking, important statistics on these identities are as follows: An estimated that 15% of the population worldwide or some 1 billion individuals live with one or more disabling conditions, of which more than 46% are older persons.<sup>17</sup>

Data are not collected in a standardized and systematic way on key topics such as violence, abuse and neglect of older women with disabilities. This is particularly the case for developing countries but is true as well for many developed countries and countries in transition.<sup>18</sup>

For instance, most surveys on violence against women are carried out on women aged 15 - 49 years and therefore exclude older women.<sup>19</sup> It also sends the unacceptable message that women's value corresponds to their reproductive years, and discounts violence that may be suffered outside of these years.

Both older women and women with disabilities are subject to violence. Women with disabilities are at least two to three times more likely than other women to experience violence.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, sexual abuse, despite being a distinct form of violence against older women remains unnamed, unrecognized, underreported and at the margins of policy formulation and intervention.<sup>21</sup> While the incidence of violence against older women is high, domestic violence legislation does not specifically include older women. Those that do, often exclude economic violence, a form of violence that women are often subjected to in older age.<sup>22</sup>

It is imperative to recognize that they continue to actively contribute to societies and economies, but their contributions remain invisible. Many older women, including women with disabilities continue to care for parents, spouses, neighbors, and grandchildren. Evidence demonstrates that hours devoted to care work increase with the age of the caregiver.<sup>23</sup> In developing countries, 50% of AIDS orphans are being raised by a grandparent.<sup>24</sup>

Older women with disabilities are at a particular risk of being heavily affected by crisis, and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup> Among women who died from COVID-19, 87 per cent were aged 60 years and over.<sup>26</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has also created the conditions for increased violence, abuse, and neglect of older people.<sup>27</sup> Drivers and risk factors included the inability to escape violence; social isolation and separation from services and varying stresses on households.<sup>28</sup>

The needs and risks faced by older women with disabilities, whether they are women with disabilities who are ageing or older women who acquire a disability later in life, as well as the challenges they face in accessing assistance, remain poorly understood and are often left unaddressed.<sup>29</sup> Stronger diversity legislation and the extension of disability rights can protect against discrimination based on an intersection of age, disability and sex.<sup>30</sup>

### Spotlighting untold stories: Jane Nyawira Miano, Kenya<sup>31</sup>

I live with my mum, who is 88 and visually impaired, and I look after her. We also live with a caregiver who takes care of both of us. I make artwork with beads to earn a living. Despite living with a disability all my life, I was still able to use public transport until I was around 55. But there are still challenges. Undeveloped infrastructure means I cannot make independent decisions as to where I want to go and when without involving others because I will need to be assisted. I depend so much on other people's decisions.

Only a few older people have access to free out-patient medical services, many older people travel long distances to access their pension, and older people are not listened to because they lack a forum to participate and share their problems and concerns.

I am currently campaigning for universal health care in Kenya, improved access to the social protection, more affordable and accessible assistive devices, more accessible infrastructure, better safety for older women and greater support for careers.

Campaigning for older people's rights has changed my attitude towards myself and others. Since I started campaigning, I have gained the confidence to share my problems and opinions. I am able to encourage and counsel other older people.

### Recommendations:

All stakeholders, including development, humanitarian, legal practitioners, national, sub-national and local governments, private sector, academia, service providers, donors, and UN system partners, are encouraged to raise awareness, take action and address the situation faced by older women with and disabilities.

Guided by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Beijing Platform for Action, and informed by a human-rights- based approach, stakeholders are encouraged to:

- Recognize the diversity and contributions of older women with disabilities and use an intersectional approach to address discrimination due to ageism, sexism, ableism, among others intersect.<sup>32</sup>
- Ensure that laws and legal frameworks that prohibit discrimination, also consider discrimination on the basis of gender, age and disability.
- Integrate a gender perspective into all disability and ageing-related policies and programmes, addressing the intersectionality of discrimination faced by older women with disabilities.<sup>33</sup>
- Provide reasonable accommodation and accessibility<sup>34</sup> to the physical environment, information and communication person with disabilities including older women with disabilities.
- Guarantee access to justice and promote the participation of older women with disabilities, including in decision-making.<sup>35</sup>
- Strengthen knowledge base on the impacts of multiple discrimination arising out of gender-age-disability intersections. UN-Women Disability Inclusion and Intersectionality Portfolio together with other inter-agency partners already developed an Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit.
- Intensify efforts to collect, analyze and disseminate data disaggregated by age, sex, disability.<sup>36</sup>
- Design programmes and interventions that foster a gender-disability-age-intersectional environment and contexts.
- Include monitoring indicators in monitoring and evaluation frameworks for the situation of older women with disabilities.
- Advocate for the rights of older women with disabilities in all contexts, including in countries and regions affected by humanitarian crises.

## Endnotes:

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