



Statement at the Fifth Session of the U.N. Open-ended Working Group on Aging for the purpose of strengthening the protection of the human rights of older persons, by C-FAM, an organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

We welcome the meeting of this Open Working Group as an important step within the United Nations, in particular as it applies to the right to life of older persons.

Demographic aging is a new reality in the history of humanity, unforeseen, unprecedented, and seemingly irreversible according to the UN Population Division.

We are especially concerned with the implications of demographic aging for the inalienable right to life of older persons in the context of end of life care.

Reports of older persons left to die or euthanized with and without their consent abound both in countries where euthanasia is permitted and where it is not. Older persons are too often left to die of starvation and dehydration because caring for them in medical facilities is deemed too expensive. These abuses are violations of the right to life of older persons as enshrined in existing human rights treaties, peremptory norms of international law, and the ethical mandate of the medical profession.

Concern for the human rights of older persons is essential, and the work of the United Nations in this area must continue, it is not enough. A binding international treaty on the rights of older persons will be meaningless if social and economic policies do not create conditions where the right to life of older persons can be protected and guaranteed.

No one knows for sure what the short and long term social and economic consequences the unprecedented reality of demographic aging will have for populations. But examples of societies that are already advanced in a demographic aging process in Europe and Asia offer a glimpse of the challenges and pitfalls that countries face in the 21st century. Shrinking workforces and markets, stagnant economies, youth unemployment, underfunded social protection systems, overstretched health systems, and even national, regional and international security challenges, are just a few of them, and they all have implications for the human rights of older persons.

All these consequences can exacerbate the difficulties in protecting the dignity and human rights of older persons and can increase instances of human rights abuses, especially in the context of end of life care.

Demographic aging in less affluent societies is especially of concern, and constitutes a veritable threat to the welfare and wellbeing of entire populations. According to UN projections demographic aging will be rapid and dramatic in less developed countries over the next three decades due to rapidly falling fertility rates and urbanization.

While countries that have achieved high levels of development are able to rely on affluent populations and ample economic resources to face the new challenges created by this demographic change, less developed countries where fiscal, social, and health systems are still in their nascent state, or absent altogether, face much greater risks.

Having this in mind, we are especially concerned with the continued emphasis of many donor countries and international bodies on misguided policies to reduce fertility. In the words of Richard Horton, editor of the prestigious medical journal *Lancet*, these policies too often are concerned with “life’s quantity” rather than the quality of life of individuals in poor countries.

Many countries that have adopted fertility reduction policies with the promise of reaping an “economic dividend” have been disappointed in the long run. Countries in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia where fertility levels have plummeted in the past 20 years have yet to see any dividend materialize.

At the same time, countries like Indonesia and Brazil, where fertility rates have been high until very recently, have experienced economic growth and expansion of wealth. Indeed, economic demographers have observed how the 20th century saw the greatest expansion of wealth to the greatest number of people than at any point in history even as the world’s population increased more than fourfold.

There is no better way to promote and protect the rights of older persons than creating social and economic conditions conducive to their care and wellbeing. Countries must discuss new policies that can actually reverse the aging process in the context of the United Nations, especially for countries where the aging process is not an advanced stage, and may actually be reversed.

Several countries whose populations are at an advanced stage of demographic aging are implementing policies that help families economically when they welcome children. A comprehensive strategy to meet the challenges of aging must study these and other child and family friendly strategies, alongside laws and policies to safeguard the human rights of older persons.

Meeting the challenges of demographic aging is difficult, especially in light of the short-term concerns and nature of political cycles. The challenge of aging is not self-evident, and unfolds over a long period of time. Too often older persons are not represented politically, and their concerns and interests are ignored.

Governments should continue to commit to discuss aging nationally and internationally and continue to raise awareness of the challenges that states are facing, in order to garner political momentum for policies to protect the rights of older persons, especially their right to life.