

## ESCWA's input\* to the Thirteenth Session of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing

### Social Inclusion of Older Persons

In the recent decades, the Arab region has witnessed an accelerated increase in the number and proportion of older persons. While the number of older persons aged 65+ increased from 4.5 million in 1970 to 20.7 million in 2020, it is expected to increase by more than 50 million in the next 30 years reaching 71.4 million in 2050. The proportion of older persons is also projected to more than double increasing from 5% in 2020 to more than 11% in 2050.

While Arab countries are embarking in the population ageing at varying speeds, it is estimated that it will take 36 years for the Arab region to complete the population ageing transition. This very rapid demographic shift, compared to other regions of the world, coupled with the complex economic and social realities in most Arab countries, and the strain put on Arab governments to meet the needs and priorities of different population groups has exacerbated the vulnerability of older persons putting them at increased risk of poverty, disease, marginalization and exclusion.

Several factors and conditions have a direct and indirect impact on the social exclusion of older persons. Despite governmental efforts, older persons in the Arab region often suffer from the absence of health coverage, social protection and income sources, increased rates of non-communicable diseases, high illiteracy rates, changing patterns and role of families and declining intergenerational support due to migration. In addition, many older persons are forced to continue to work in the informal sector and in indecent work conditions. The conflicts in the Arab region have also affected the health and well-being of older persons.

Only 38 per cent of older persons above retirement age received a pension in the Arab region in 2020, with older women being more excluded. In addition, there is considerable inequality among older persons receiving contributory pensions, with a large number receiving very small amounts, and large gaps between the private and the public sectors. On a promising note, the number of old age pensioners covered by a selection of social insurance schemes in the region has increased. Yet, the value of cash transfers in many countries is low or decreasing further due to inflation, not to mention that the sustainability of many contributory pension schemes is at risk due to the increased proportion of beneficiaries relative to the proportion of contributors.

In most countries of the region the age of retirement is set between 60 and 65 for men and women, with slight differences between the public and private sectors. Some countries have put in place legislation or policies that allow older persons to continue to work after retirement if they wish to do so, in line with the active ageing concept. However, these opportunities remain limited. This, together with the insufficiency of pension systems coverage, threatens the financial security of older persons, putting them at greater risk of exclusion and marginalization.

In most Arab countries, non-communicable diseases are the leading cause of deaths for older persons 60 and above. The four main non-communicable diseases affecting older persons are cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes. Those diseases incur financial burden on

\*This input is prepared based on findings from Population and Development Report Issue No. 9 and results of the 4<sup>th</sup> regional review of MIPAA in the Arab region 2022

older persons and their families in a region where total out of pocket expenditure on health could reach more than 70% in some countries. With the deficit in health insurance coverage and health services dedicated to older persons, and the lack of qualified specialized personnel in geriatric medicine, older persons are at greater risk of disease, limiting their ability to participate in economic, social, political and cultural life, thus exposing them to further exclusion.

The high illiteracy rate among older persons in various countries is yet another cause of vulnerability and exclusion. At least two out of every three older persons are illiterate in six Arab countries, and illiteracy is higher among women. Most Arab countries have developed literacy and continued education programs targeting older persons, yet enrolment in these programs remains low. In addition, digital illiteracy among older persons constitutes a barrier to reaching several services, participating in social and cultural life, as well communicating with family and friends especially in times of crises, thus increasing the risk exclusion and neglect.

Ageism and a negative image of older persons are main reasons that lead to undermining the critical roles that older persons play in their communities and within their families. The contributions of older persons often go unnoticed. Some countries in the region have put in place promising programs and initiatives that encourage voluntary work of older persons in an attempt not only to benefit from their experiences but also to promote a positive image of older persons as efficient contributors to development of societies. Yet, a stereotype of older persons as recipients of care and help prevails, leading to discrimination, exclusion, neglect.

Families who, in the Arab region, are the main care providers for older persons are facing increasing difficulties to play this role due the changing family structures in addition to migration of family members. Resorting to institutionalized care would negatively impact the psychological well-being of older persons in a society that still sees this type of care as unthinkable. In addition, in the lack of clear standards that regulate the work of these institutions, such option would put older persons at greater risk of exclusion and neglect not to mention discrimination. Long term care services that could be delivered at the older person's home and within their families provides an acceptable alternative that could ensure intergenerational support, along the lines of the concept of ageing in place.

Several countries in the Arab region have developed, and a lower number of countries have in place specific laws for older persons. Mainstreaming ageing issues in the policy making process is key to responding to the priorities of older persons, meeting their needs, and ensuring their rights and dignity are safeguarded. In this context, ESCWA has also developed a [toolkit](#) that aims at advancing and protecting the rights of older persons through assisting decision makers in mainstreaming ageing issues into national policies and strategies. ESCWA also assists several member countries at the national level in developing older persons strategies.

In line with its commitment to achieve social inclusion older persons and ensuring they are not left behind, ESCWA has provided policy recommendations to member countries on the way forward in the [Population and Development Report Issue No. 9: Building forward better for older persons](#) as well as the fourth MIPAA regional review report [Ageing in ESCWA member States](#).

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