

**grandmothers**  
Advocacy Network



Mouvement de soutien des  
**grands-mères**

Advocating for the human rights of older women  
Défense des droits de la personne des femmes âgées

**GRANDMOTHERS ADVOCACY NETWORK (GRAN) RESPONSES TO THE  
OPEN-ENDED WORKING GROUP ON AGING QUESTIONNAIRE  
NOVEMBER 2023**



## BACKGROUND:

The Open-ended Working Group on Ageing, in its decision 13/1 adopted at the thirteenth session, requested the co-facilitators to submit proposed intergovernmental negotiated recommendations to be considered at the fourteenth session of the Working Group and to be presented for consideration by the General Assembly, in accordance with resolution 77/190, regarding the existing international framework of the human rights of older persons and possible gaps, and options on how best to address them.

The purpose of this questionnaire is meant to facilitate the consideration of the existing international framework of the human rights of older persons and the identification of possible gaps and the means to address these gaps.

This questionnaire will be sent to all States Members of the United Nations, observers in the General Assembly, A-status National Human Rights Institutions, non-governmental organizations with ECOSOC Status and previously accredited organizations to the Working Group, as well as United Nations Funds, Programs, Specialized Agencies, and other UN entities.

## ABOUT THE GRANDMOTHERS ADVOCACY NETWORK (GRAN)

GRAN is a non-partisan network of volunteers working together across Canada to advocate at local, national, and international levels. We advocate to influence national and global policymakers.

Our vision is a world where the human rights of older women, children, youth, and gender-diverse persons are recognized and protected so that they can achieve their full potential. Our passion for this vision is a deep concern for the well-being and human rights of grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa and the children and youth in their care, as well as those of vulnerable and marginalized women in communities of the Global South.

Our advocacy is grounded in a firm commitment to social justice, equality, and human rights. Older women and the children they support are central to this advocacy. GRAN acts in four key areas:

- The right to health
- The right to education and life-long learning
- The right to freedom from violence
- The right to economic security and social protection

GRAN works by taking every opportunity to participate when, where and however they can to influence Canadian and international decision-makers as they make choices, allocate resources, and develop policies and programs that impact the world's most vulnerable. GRAN works in partnership with many Civil Society Organizations in Canada and internationally with whom they share similar issues and goals. GRAN engages with Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers, parliamentary committees, and Parliamentary Secretaries, as well as with other organizations that play a role in international development. Advocacy issues may include a mailing campaign, and holding public events to draw attention to human rights that are being violated or ignored.

## THE QUESTIONS:

### 1. IDENTIFICATION OF LIMITATIONS, DEFICIENCIES AND GAPS:

*For each of the topics that have been considered by the Open-Ended Working Group since its eighth session, please state possible gaps your government/organization has identified in the normative framework and practical implementation for the protection of the human rights of older persons.*

Of the fourteen gaps identified, GRAN is most interested in and involved in the following:

- Equality and non-discrimination (notably ageism)
- Violence, neglect, and abuse
- Education, training, lifelong learning, and capacity building
- Access to justice
- Contribution of Older Persons to Sustainable Development (as specially related to food security and growing one's food)
- Economic security
- Right to Health, and Access to Health Services
- Accessibility, infrastructure, and habitat (transport, age-friendly housing that is affordable, accessible, and appropriate)
- Participation in public life and in decision-making processes

These LIMITATIONS, DEFICIENCIES AND GAPS impact the quality of life and well-being of grandmothers in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as older women in the Global South. These grandmothers/older women face violations to their rights in five fundamental areas and these become our pillars for action.

### Pillar 1: Education and Lifelong Learning:

Education is a fundamental human right that is unrealized in much of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Sub-Saharan grandmothers have requested more and better education for their grandchildren. Increased education funding for infrastructure such as training of teachers and building of schools will bring much-needed resources to their communities. Schools often become a gathering place for the community, ensuring education becomes a new and important community-wide priority.

In Sub-Saharan Africa

- Older women most likely to have/had limited or no access to education while growing up.
- Globally, Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest out-of-school rate for all ages.
- Before COVID-19, 97 million children and youth were out of school (5.1 million of whom were girls); now 250 million more children are out of school, bringing the total number to 350 million.
- About 23 million out-of-school children are living in fragile and conflict-affected regions.
- There are 123 million women in SSA, of whom 64% are illiterate.
- Half of all primary classes exceed 50 pupils.

- Children and youth face many barriers to accessing a quality education, such as poverty and the cost of schooling, lack of infrastructure, lack of quality trained teachers, water and sanitation, social and cultural norms that include child marriage, housework, taking care of siblings, and fetching water, violence, hunger, and poor nutrition.

Education is key to development, and can lead to greater economic prosperity, better health outcomes and greater gender equality. Education also reduces exploitation and violence and enables people to reach their full potential.

Canada's Role:

- In June of 2017, Canada launched a Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) with a new vision for laying a foundation for positioning Canada as a leader on gender equality through its aid program. Albeit education is not a pillar of the FIAP, the government acknowledged the underlying importance of education in achieving Canada's development goals.
- At the G7 summit in Charlevoix in June 2017, Canada announced an historic investment of \$400 million toward education for girls and women in crisis and conflict situations.
- Canada is a founding member and active partner of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). The GPE works in over 80 countries with 38 of these countries in sub-Saharan Africa. A key objective of the GPE is to ensure that more girls enroll in school and receive a quality education. The GPE fosters an inclusive and participatory approach, bringing all partners at the country level together in a focused and coordinated way, with the goal of strengthening national education systems.
- In 2016, GRAN joined the newly formed Canadian International Education Policy Working Group (CIEPWG) to influence the Government of Canada's policy approach to global education as well as to increase the Government's financial commitments to improve access to inclusive, safe, and quality education. GRAN will continue to partner with CIEPWG to advocate for increased funding for the Global Partnership for Education.

Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, including lifelong learning, is critical for prosperity, economic growth and achieving a peaceful, stable, and secure African continent.

LIMITATIONS, DEFICIENCIES AND GAPS:

- Lack of infrastructure such as schools being a distance away from home, classrooms being overcrowded, lack of resources (books, computers), lack of well qualified/trained teachers.
- Poverty and the cost of schooling borne by aging grandmothers who are caregivers for grandchildren orphaned due to parental loss due to HIV/AIDS
- Lack of sanitation and water within school environments.
- Violence, including exploitation by teachers, unsafe journeys to school, gender-based violence in schools.
- Hunger and poor nutrition.
- Social and cultural norms that may include child marriage, doing housework and not attending school, taking care of siblings.

## Pillar 2: Health and Access to Health Services

Older women in sub-Saharan Africa and the Global South, may not have access to required medicines and age-friendly health and social care (including support for preventing, treating, and caring for African grandmothers and the children in their care who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS). Many older women suffer from untreated chronic problems and diseases such as high blood pressure, depression, musculoskeletal problems, vision impairment, functional disability, and arthritis. Generally, there is a lack of basic resources required for health, such as nutritious food, clean water, and adequate, safe housing.

Albeit the UNAIDS Global Report 2023 stated that numbers of new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths have continued to decrease globally, this is not true for Sub-Saharan Africa, which remains the highest risk area in the world, with 63% of new HIV/AIDS incidence. According to this report, the path to end HIV/AIDS requires a strong political commitment to put people first and invest in evidence-based HIV prevention and treatment programs.

### LIMITATIONS, DEFICIENCIES AND GAPS:

- Lack of accessibility to medicines is a significant issue, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Lack of data on women over 49, and older women.
- Older women are least likely to get tested for HIV/AIDS or have access to treatment.
- Lack of money for HIV/AIDS testing and treatment for grandmothers and young people in their care.
- Poor access to antiretroviral therapy and other medicines, including vaccines.

## Pillar 3: Freedom from Violence

Violence against girls and women of all ages is a widespread and systemic violation of human rights. It often begins in childhood and is exacerbated with early marriage, motherhood, widowhood, and aging. Violence against older women may take the form of physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, as well as financial exploitation and neglect. It is often perpetrated by intimate partners and family members.

Older women in sub-Saharan Africa face multiple challenges to their physical security and right to non-violence. The violence these women experience remains largely invisible. National policies on gender equality rarely include the violence perpetuated against older women.

### LIMITATIONS, DEFICIENCIES AND GAPS:

- Failure by law enforcement and the legal system to protect older women and ensure their right to well-being and safety.
- Domestic abuse by intimate partners and others in the household.
- Elder abuse.
- Neglect and failure to provide food and support when an older woman is unable to care for herself.

- Abusive traditional practices including witchcraft allegations and cruel, dehumanizing widowhood practices.
- Attacks and killing of older widows to take their property.
- Wife inheritance (a widow is required to marry/have sexual relationships with a male relative of her late husband).
- Neglect and abandonment in cases of natural disasters and emergencies.
- High vulnerability to sexual violence in refugee camps.
- Rape and sexual violence as war tactics in conflict areas, including exposure to HIV infection.

#### Pillar 4: Economic Security/Social Protection

Older women are at a high risk of poverty, especially those who live alone, are widowed, divorced or who have disabilities and those caring for vulnerable young people orphaned by AIDS. As a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of poor households headed by grandmothers.

Less than 1 in 5 older people in sub-Saharan Africa receive a social “old age” pension. Inheritance laws and customs often deny older women the right to own or inherit land and property. Even when laws are in place, older women frequently do not have the knowledge or money they need to gain access to property. In patriarchal customary systems land and property rights belong to the males of her husband’s family. Although a widow may be allowed to continue to live in her marital home, she does not own the land, cannot inherit it and lives there at the goodwill of her husband’s family.

Gender inequalities underlie property and land ownership, inheritance, and use. Older women become increasingly vulnerable to landlessness, homelessness, marginalization, and food security. Under International Human Rights Law, women and men are entitled to equal protection of their property rights.

#### LIMITATIONS, DEFICIENCIES AND GAPS:

- Lack of universal social pensions in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Gender inequalities in property and land ownership, and inheritance.
- Persistence of extreme poverty, inequality, and vulnerability of older women.
- Albeit pensions, foster care grants and stipends for home-based care workers have been created, as in South Africa, bureaucratic policies make it difficult for older women to access.

#### Pillar 5: Human Rights, Equality and Full Participation

Invisibility to policymakers, a lifetime of gender inequality and ageism is behind much of women’s struggle to enjoy their rights and fully participate in elected assemblies, decision-making bodies, and the development process in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In low-income countries, the challenge of invisibility is exacerbated by data paucity in relation to older women. For example, very little or no data is collected on HIV status and the experience of violence for women over 49 years. Older women are denied basic services and protection of their human rights

because of their absence from official records, and they are invisible to policymakers and organizations providing development assistance.

It is important to note that there are great variations between and among countries in the sub-Saharan African regions. For example, older women living in very low-income countries or countries in conflict will have different life circumstances than those living in low- and middle-income countries with stable governments in place. There are also differences and inequities within countries themselves, for example, between rural and urban areas.

#### LIMITATIONS, DEFICIENCIES AND GAPS:

- Lack of data collection on the status of women over age 49 years e.g., HIV/AIDS history, violence.
- Older women denied basic services and protection of their rights due to absence from official government records and organizations providing development assistance.
- Discrimination associated with both age and gender.
- Recognition of contributions older women make in their communities often goes unnoticed, hence being invisible.

## 2. OPTIONS ON HOW TO ADDRESS THE LIMITATIONS, DEFICIENCIES AND GAPS IDENTIFIED IN #1

### Pillar 1: Education and Lifelong Learning:

- Encourage Member States to provide services to older persons, specifically older women who have assumed responsibility for children who were abandoned or whose parents are deceased, have migrated, and/or have been displaced.
- Encourage inclusive and equitable quality education, including lifelong learning, as a critical component for prosperity, economic growth and achieving a peaceful, stable, and secure African continent.
- Encourage Member States to advocate their governments to provide increased funding for the Global Partnership for Education and ensure that replenishment goals are met in a timely manner.
- Support the development and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons to protect and enhance older women's right to education and lifelong learning.

## Pillar 2: Health and Access to Health Services

- Ensure that all data collection on women includes women over age 50, and that all data and information on HIV/AIDS prevention, infection, treatment, and care are tracked. Ensure that all data on health is disaggregated by sex and age.
- Continue to inform civil society, governments, students, and international agencies about the health issues faced by older women/grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Press for increased funding in the AIDS response e.g., Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria.
- Advocate for policies and programs that address older women and non-communicable diseases (e.g., diabetes, hypertension) and conditions associated with older age (e.g., cataracts, mobility problems).
- Support the development and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons to protect and enhance older women's right to health and to health services.

## Pillar 3: Freedom from Violence

- Count older women in! Ensure that all data collection on women includes women over age 50, and that all data are disaggregated by sex and age.
- Advocate for the enactment and enforcement of laws to prohibit domestic violence, rape and sexual violence in war, land grabbing and harmful practices such as forced marriage and wife inheritance at any age.
- Support community-level organizations and mechanisms to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence and to support older women in their right to non-violence.
- Support screening and interventions related to violence in healthcare settings, including HIV testing and counselling.
- Support the development and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons to protect and enhance older women's right to non-violence.

## Pillar 4: Economic Security /Social Protection

- Advocate for the development of and implementation of universal social pensions in sub-Saharan Africa, considering that pensions need to be part of a wider package of social protection measures that include access to free age-friendly healthcare, lifesaving medicines, education, and lifelong learning and to child and disability grants, community social-assistance funds and credit schemes.
- Ensure that inheritance laws are reflective of the International Human Rights Law, where women and men are entitled to equal protection of their property rights.
- Support the development and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons to protect and enhance older women's right to economic security.



## Pillar 5: Human Rights, Equality and Full Participation

- Protect and promote the rights of older women/grandmothers by taking a life course, feminist and rights-based approach that emphasizes older women/grandmothers and supports intergenerational solidarity.
- Count older women in! Ensure that all data collection includes women over age 50, and that all data are disaggregated by sex and age.
- Recognize that older women/grandmothers are key agents of development in their communities; support community organizations and grandmother groups that are leading the way and advocating for their rights.
- Press for gender equality at all ages and the inclusion of older women in international and domestic policies and programs.
- Continue to monitor and comment on Canada's budget for international development assistance and our contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals on poverty and equality, especially as it relates to older women.
- Support the development and passage of a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

### SUMMARY:

The Grandmothers Advocacy Network recognizes the challenges related to the enjoyment of all human rights that older persons face in different areas and those challenges require both in-depth analysis and action to address protection gaps.

Resolution 77/190 deals with the follow-up to the Madrid Plan of Action. There were 60 recommendations. It calls upon all states to promote and ensure the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for older persons, including by progressively taking measures to combat age-discrimination, neglect, abuse and violence, as well as social isolation and loneliness, to provide social protection, access to food and housing, health-care services, employment, information and communications technologies, including new technologies, assistive technologies, legal capacity and access to justice and to address issues related to social integration and gender inequality through mainstreaming the Rights of Older Persons into sustainable development strategies, urban policies and poverty reduction strategies, including the crucial importance of intergenerational solidarity for social development.

Seventy-five years ago, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. This document was the first to outline the fundamental human rights that are meant to

be universally protected. The rights of older people were included in the Declaration. Member States have “committed to the protection of the human rights of older persons in a number of areas: through the establishment of the United Nations Decade of Health Ageing, 2021-2030, adoption by the Human Rights Council of its resolution 48/3 which encourages States to take measures to combat ageism and eliminate age discrimination; the establishment by the World Health Organization (WHO) of a Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities” ( from Position Paper submitted to the 2023 High Level Political Forum by the Stakeholder Group on Ageing).

However, action to address the needs and wants of older people, especially women, have not kept pace with this Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hence the establishment of the Open-Ended Working Group was formed to assess and evaluate where there were gaps and develop an existing framework that would address these gaps/deficiencies/limitations.

A binding Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would protect and promote the human rights of older persons world-wide and would address the gaps/deficiencies/limitations stemming from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Grandmothers Advocacy Network supports this call to action to develop such a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

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