

Substantive inputs to the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing – 12th session – Focus areas

Introduction

Age International's report *Older women: the hidden workforce* provides evidence on older women's experience of access to economic rights, in Ethiopia and Malawi. The research revealed that older women are contributing essential work to their households and communities, underpinning sustainable development, and are facing significant challenges to accessing their rights, including to a secure income, decent working conditions, rest, and autonomy over their work. Ultimately, the barriers they face impede older women's access to their right to freely pursue and to enjoy economic, social and cultural development.

All evidence is from *Older women: the hidden workforce*¹ unless otherwise stated.

Focus area 1: Contribution of older persons to sustainable development

CHALLENGES FACED BY OLDER PERSONS

- National levels:

Age International research in Ethiopia and Malawi showed that older women are not recognised as active participants of development by their communities.

Although older women are carrying out significant unpaid and paid work to support themselves and others, this is often not recognised as work.

For example, many older women in both Malawi and Ethiopia are primary carers of young children; however, when they seek paid work to support themselves and their households, they are denied access or paid less or nothing for their contributions. In Malawi, older women were obliged to work for free for the same work which younger people were paid to do, impeding their right to fair remuneration.

Older women also described being excluded from household meals due to their perceived lack of contribution, even where they are providing unpaid and paid work, and from community fertiliser subsidy programmes. This impedes their right to fair distribution of the benefits of development.

Many older women told us that if they had access to a secure income through a pension, they would exercise their choice by stopping the heavier labour and spend more time on the work they favour.

In our research in Ethiopia and Malawi, older women workers were mocked or told they should not be working for income or faced violence or discrimination while carrying out their work – for example older women working in public toilets in Ethiopia faced harassment and abuse from customers.

- International levels:

Older women, particularly those from poorer communities and experiencing intersecting inequalities, are often excluded from international policy forums; older women were barely included as speakers at Generation Equality Forum except to address issues affecting young women. As a

¹ Age International: Older women – the hidden workforce (2021) <https://www.ageinternational.org.uk/policy-research/publications/older-women-the-hidden-workforce/>

result, older women were not explicitly included in the initial pledges made by Commitment Makers, and only recognised as recipients of care rather than active participants in development.

DATA, STATISTICS AND RESEARCH ON OLDER PERSONS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Older women: the hidden workforce has revealed the myriad of ways in which older persons - especially women - contribute to the development of their communities and the fulfilment of other people's rights, as unpaid carers, as community volunteers and as workers in mostly informal, precarious roles. While older women told us their work is essential to their and their households' survival and to their self-identity, the relentlessness of their work and the conditions they are working under undermine their dignity, choice and wellbeing.

- Older women globally are carrying out on average 4.3 hours of unpaid care and domestic work per day.² In many low- and middle-income settings, older women are caring for young children, due to the impacts of HIV and AIDs, economic migration and humanitarian crises, and providing care to other older people in the community.
- Globally, 1 in 7 older women are in the labour force – this is likely to be an underestimate due to many data sets excluding older and informal workers. Since 1990 the proportion of older women in the labour force has increased, while reducing for older men. Older women are often working in informal (usually underpaid) roles, including as street sellers, craft makers, pieceworkers, farmers, brick breakers, caterers, cleaners and domestic workers.
- Older women have specific community roles, often relating to spiritual guidance and counselling for younger people, visiting the sick, and religious ceremonies.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the barriers that older women face to accessing their rights – older people's, especially older women's, earnings were hit more severely than younger workers' between February and July 2020, and they took longer to recover their livelihoods.³
- Our research has shown that older women's work is driven by their wish to be active and to contribute, as well as a perceived duty, based on their age and gender, to provide care and income for their household, to free up younger women to work or get an education, and to support community cohesion.

Older women: the hidden workforce provides examples that the amount and type of older women's work depends on the availability of informal and formal support, with those who have a pension, access to healthcare, or support from family members having more access to their right to freely choose their work. Many older women are doing the work they do, for example collecting water in

² ODI: Between work and care – Older women's economic empowerment (2018)
<https://odi.org/en/publications/between-work-and-care-older-womens-economic-empowerment/>

³ WIEGO, COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy: Policy Insights No.5 – Older Informal Workers in the COVID-19 crisis <https://www.wiego.org/resources/older-informal-workers-covid-19-crisis>

the early morning, because of the unwillingness of others to do this work. When older women are no longer able or wish to stop work, the systems in low- and middle-income countries often do not enable them to make this choice while retaining support and respect.

The research showed the value of older women's participation in research and consultations within development, in order to identify specific solutions to improve their standard of living.

Focus area 2: Economic security

CHALLENGES FOR OLDER PERSONS BASED ON AGE, GENDER AND OTHER GROUNDS

Older women face specific discrimination and inequalities due to their age and gender, compounded by disability and marital status.

Gender inequalities faced over their lifetimes present older women with additional challenges in accessing their right to social security, and community power dynamics which confine older women to low status impede their rights to work, make a living, and participate in development.

Older women in Malawi are denied payment for their equal work within public works programmes and are turned away from the tea factory due to assumptions about their capacity for work. Some older women are neglected and abused due to witchcraft accusations, affecting their right to economic security.

Some older women described exclusion from household decisions, denying them the right to exercise autonomy over their natural resources and assets.

DATA, STATISTICS AND RESEARCH

- Only around 20 per cent of older people in low-income countries receive a pension, and older women are less likely than men to access one.⁴
- Measures of old age poverty are flawed because they do not capture how resources are shared within the household⁵ – however, 107 million multidimensionally poor people are aged 60 or older.⁶ Households tend to prioritise the needs of children.
- Skipped generation households are the poorest types of households in low- and middle-income countries.⁷
- In Sub Saharan Africa, widows and older women living alone or caring for orphans are most at risk of poverty, exclusion and marginalisation.⁸
- Our research showed that due to their poverty and need to support themselves, older women's work often involves long hours, low pay, and no social or legal protection, in a hazardous environment or with unsafe equipment.

TACKLING ECONOMIC INSECURITY AND POVERTY IN OLDER AGE

⁴ International Labour Organization: Social protection policy paper 17 – Social protection for older persons: Policy trends and statistics 2017-19

⁵ HelpAge International: Bearing the brunt – the impact of COVID-19 on older people in low- and middle-income countries – insights from 2020 <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/bearing-the-brunt/>

⁶ United Nations Development Programme: Human Development Reports – The 2020 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-MPI>

⁷ ODI and Age International: Between work and care – Older women's economic empowerment (2018)

⁸ <https://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/southern-and-eastern-africa-regional-gender-policy-brief>

In many low- and middle-income countries, universal social pensions have been introduced affordably. A significant proportion of older people receiving Malawi's pilot social cash transfer for older people, or cash transfers under the Public Safety Net Programmes in Ethiopia, spent them on generating income and supporting livelihoods.⁹ Social pensions have proven advantages particularly for older women; Kenya's Inua Jamii pension has improved older women's economic empowerment and income security.¹⁰ In Ethiopia, a small proportion of older women have benefitted from the PSNP, but the amount is currently inadequate for meeting their basic needs.

Financial inclusion, for example being able to access microcredit or other capital through community schemes, can also enable older women's access to income and their right to participate in development.

ECONOMIC SECURITY OF OLDER PERSONS AND MACROECONOMIC POLICY

The exclusion of older women from broader strategies and policy discussions on women's unpaid work and labour force participation impedes older women's access to rights, including to social security and decent work, and to participate in sustainable development.

Regional and national policy papers on jobs and economic growth focus on youth employment – for example, the Ethiopia National Plan for Job Creation. Older women are particularly disadvantaged by the exclusion of unpaid work from economic measurements and the inconsistency of data capturing informal work. Even where these measurements are challenged by NGOs and academics, older women are not targeted in research, and data is not fully disaggregated by age.

The ILO's Decent Work Agenda aspires to make decent work a reality for all, including informal workers. Efforts to implement this agenda must explicitly include older people, who disproportionately work in the informal economy.

Social protection is widely recognised as a key element of the global response to tackle poverty, including in older age. All social protection systems should take a comprehensive, gender responsive and life cycle approach and include universal social pensions, which are crucial especially for reaching women and informal workers; ensuring their rights to choose their work freely, to an adequate standard of living, and to participate in development. However, IMF loans often contain austerity conditions which limit governments' fiscal space for social protection, and favour narrowly targeted measures. The COVID 19 pandemic showed that it is possible to quickly scale up social protection in response to crises; it is crucial that post-COVID 19 measures build on this.

MECHANISMS FOR COMPLAINT AND REDRESS

⁹HelpAge International and MANEPO : Impacts of Malawi's Social Cash Transfer on Older People and their households (2018) <https://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/impacts-malawi%E2%80%99s-social-cash-transfer-older-people-and-their-households#:~:text=The%20SCTP%20contributes%20not%20only,and%20provision%20of%20their%20material> and HelpAge International and Irish Aid: Coverage of older people in Ethiopia's social protection system (2019) https://socialprotection.org/sites/default/files/publications_files/Coverage%20of%20older%20people%20in%20Ethiopia%E2%80%99s%20social%20protection%20system.pdf

¹⁰ Development Pathways: 'I feel more loved' – Autonomy, self-worth and Kenya's universal pension (2019) <https://www.developmentpathways.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Inua-Jamii-.pdf>; <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Ageing%20report.pdf>

Strengthening voice and accountability – supporting older persons to hold their governments to account, and government capacity to respond to their concerns – is critical for improving rights-based social protection schemes.

The older citizen monitoring approach, which has been piloted in a range of countries, raises awareness among older people of their right to social protection, monitors delivery of social protection policies and schemes, and advocates with governments. It includes providing regular information on social pension entitlements using different communication methods, training older people to support others to speak up, and involving older people in data collection. ¹¹

¹¹ HelpAge International: Voice and accountability in social protection – Lessons from social pensions in Africa (2018) https://socialprotection.org/sites/default/files/publications_files/VASP-Online.pdf