



INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MEDIATION

"Fostering a culture of peace among ethnic and religious groups"

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U.S. 501 (c) (3) tax exempt public charity, nonprofit and non-governmental organization in Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

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Re: Equality, Non-discrimination, Neglect, Violence, and Abuse in the Context of Older Persons

Statement of International Center for Ethno-Religious Mediation on Focus Issues of the 8th Session of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing

The International Center for Ethno-Religious Mediation (ICERM) is committed to supporting sustainable peace in countries around the world, and we are well aware of the contributions that can be made by our elders. ICERM has established the World Elders Forum strictly for elders, traditional rulers/leaders or representatives of ethnic, religious, community and indigenous groups. We invite the contributions of those who have lived through astounding technological, political, and social changes. We need their help in reconciling these changes with customary laws and traditions. We seek their wisdom in settling disputes peacefully, preventing conflict, beginning dialogue, and encouraging other nonviolent methods of conflict resolution.

Yet, as we researched answers to the specific Guiding Questions for this session, it is disappointing to see that the United States, where our organization is based, has limited views on the human rights of older persons. We have civil and criminal laws to protect them from physical and financial abuse. We have laws to help them maintain some autonomy, even when they need guardians or others to speak for them on limited issues, such as health care or financial decisions. Yet we haven't done much to challenge social norms, to maintain inclusion of ageing persons, or to reintegrate those who have become isolated.

First, we lump everyone over age 60 into one group, as if they are all the same. Can you imagine if we did that for everyone under age 30? A wealthy 80-year-old woman in Manhattan who has access to health care and modern medicine clearly has different needs than a 65-year-old man in agrarian Iowa. Just as we seek to identify, embrace, and reconcile the distinctions among people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds, ICERM works to bring elders and other marginalized people into the conversations that affect them. We haven't forgotten that what affects us also affects them. It's true that we might not be affected in the same ways, but *each* of us is affected uniquely, and each of our experiences is valid. We must take the time to look beyond age, as in some ways we are also discriminating on that basis and perpetuating the very problems we seek to resolve.

Second, in the US, we protect older persons from discrimination when they are still working, but

there appears to be an acquiescence where access to goods and services, health care, and social care are concerned. We have our own prejudices against them when they are not “productive”. The Americans with Disabilities Act will protect them as their physical limitations decrease and they must navigate public spaces, but will they have adequate health care and social care? Too much depends on income, and more than one-third of our ageing population is living near the federal poverty level. The number of those with the same financial plan for their later years is only expected to increase, and at times when we are also preparing for worker shortages.

We are not convinced that additional legislation would change much of the discrimination we see against ageing persons, nor do we think it would be drafted consistent with our Constitution. As mediators and skilled facilitators, we see an opportunity for dialogue and creative problem-solving when we include the ageing populations. We still have a lot to learn about the many different people that comprise this large section of the world population. Perhaps this is the time for us to listen, observe, and collaborate.

Third, we need more programs that keep ageing persons connected with their communities. Where they have already become isolated, we need to re-integrate them through volunteering, mentoring, and other programs that remind them of their value and encourage their continuing contributions, not as punishment but as opportunity. We have programs for children, who are only going to remain children for 18 years. Where are the equivalent programs for 60- and 70-somethings who might also have 18 or more years to learn and grow, especially where the adults often have more knowledge and experience to share than the children during their 18 years? I do not mean to suggest the education of children has no value, but we are missing huge opportunities when we fail to empower older people, too.

As American Bar Association Liaison stated at the Sixth Session, “a convention on human rights for older persons must be about more than just compiling and specifying rights. It must also change the social paradigm of aging.” (Mock, 2015). The American Association for Retired Persons agrees, adding “By Disrupting Aging—changing the conversation about what it means to grow older—we can spark solutions and tap resources that evolve the workplace, expand the marketplace and remake our communities.” (Collett, 2017). We cannot do all of these effectively until we challenge our own implicit biases about aging, which we do through skilled facilitation.

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