

## 11th session of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing

### Message from Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

29 March 2021

Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Friends and colleagues,

It was exactly 10 years ago that this Working Group began its efforts to strengthen the protection of the human rights of older persons, and to develop proposals for an international legal instrument towards this end.

We will also soon mark the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, with its new agenda and commitment to building a society for all ages.

And it has been 30 years since the adoption of the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, which laid out key principles for older persons, and important guidance in terms of independence, participation, care, self-fulfillment and dignity.

We have seen some progress. But today, that modest progress is being overshadowed by the tragic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older persons.

The crisis has exposed critical human rights protection gaps for older persons, including widespread discrimination based on older age; lack of social protection – especially for women – and of access to health services; failure to uphold autonomy and participation in decision-making; and failure to ensure that older people are free from violence, neglect and abuse.

The Secretary General's [Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons](#) issued in May 2020 made it clear how vital it is to step up efforts to protect the human rights of older persons – in the pandemic, and beyond it. In response, 146 Member States issued a statement committing them to “fully promoting and respecting the dignity and rights of older people”.

This is just one example of what I see as a renewed political imperative to prioritize the protection of older persons. I also welcome the increasingly strong and organized work of civil society movements around the world. Many of you are among the 122 civil society organizations and networks who sent a joint letter to the Secretary-General welcomed the Policy Brief and urged increased efforts across the UN system to uphold the human rights of older people.

We are also seeing increased UN interagency efforts across countries, regions and the world to respond to the pandemic with efforts that are coordinated, age-inclusive and rights-based.

Implementation of the new UN Decade for Healthy Ageing, approved by the General Assembly last year, offers opportunities for greater collaboration.

The Secretary-General's Policy Brief called on States to accelerate efforts by this Working Group to develop proposals for an international legal instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of older persons.

In line with the request made at the most recent Working Group session, my Office has been updating the analytical paper on normative standards in international law in relation to older persons, originally issued in 2012 as a contribution to the Working Group.

The new updated OHCHR study takes stock of developments over the last decade and provides further analysis of protection gaps, as well as the adequacy of the existing international legal framework for the promotion and protection of the human rights of older persons.

It includes some of the impacts of COVID-19, including the added urgency of addressing these gaps by building more age-friendly societies.

The study highlights that, the existing international human rights framework provides fragmented and inconsistent coverage of the human rights of older persons, in law and practice.

Engagement by international human rights mechanisms on the human rights of older persons has been far from systematic, coherent or sustained.

The lack of a dedicated normative instrument on the subject and the conceptual limitations of existing instruments continue to hinder the effective protection of human rights of older persons.

The experience of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, among other instruments, clearly demonstrates that development of a dedicated legal instrument can effectively contribute to changes in law and practice at the national level.

I hope that this study will contribute to your discussions, as you consider next steps forward towards the fulfilment of your important mandate.

Thank you.