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SOCIAL INCLUSION OF OLDER PEOPLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Good morning, everyone. Please allow me to address the critical issue of social inclusion among older people in the Middle East. The region is experiencing rapid demographic and social changes, dramatically affecting older people's lives, particularly women.

According to the United Nations, the Middle East is experiencing the fastest pace of ageing globally, with the number of people aged 60 and over expected to triple by 2050. Women are more affected by ageing, as they tend to live longer, alone for extended periods and with a higher disease burden.

Despite a narrative of respecting and treasuring older people, economic and social realities, coupled with a lack of awareness of older people's rights, have led to a high prevalence of ageism, mistreatment, and abuse. While the ideology of respect is strongly present, the practical applications position the older person, especially women, as vulnerable, lacking the autonomy and ability to make their own decisions encouraging passive dependency.

Older women in the Middle East are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion. Women over 60 are twice as likely to live alone and have limited social and economic engagement opportunities than men.

Elder abuse is a significant but hidden problem in the region. Recent studies indicate that 30-50% of older people experience some form of abuse or neglect. The most common forms are emotional and financial abuse, usually within the family. Yet, up to 80% of cases may go unreported due to a lack of recognition of what constitutes abuse and the stigma and shame of acknowledging it had happened. Also, the fear of losing the only support an older person might have.

The human rights of older persons in the Middle East are not yet fully recognised by laws, legislation or practice. The World Health Organization reports that only four out of 25 countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region have laws specifically addressing elder abuse.

Care for older family members often falls on the shoulders of middle-aged daughters, who are already juggling multiple responsibilities. The burden of care is invisible, as it goes unrecognized and unsupported by external services. This lack of formal support and training takes a toll on informal caregivers' physical and mental health. To make matters worse, the absence of regulated services that promote effective care approaches means that older people's chances of receiving adequate care are slim. This is especially challenging when caring for individuals living with dementia.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted older people, particularly in terms of their physical and mental health. Due to the pandemic's restrictions, older people have experienced acute social isolation and limited social interaction leading to a rapid decline in their health and well-being. Unfortunately, it is likely that some of these negative effects will be irreversible for many.

To address these issues, we need to take a collaborative approach. At the societal level, we should capitalize on the notions of respecting and treasuring older people by creating effective mechanisms for a meaningful exchange that acknowledges the autonomy of the older person and their actual needs and desires.

Initiating programs to promote the social inclusion of older people, particularly women is crucial. Community-based and intergenerational programmes can bring together young and older people to foster mutual benefits for both groups. This will utilize the region's youth dividends and enhance future cohorts' opportunities to experience more inclusive, healthier longevity.

At the policy level, we must develop and implement policies and programmes protecting older people from abuse and mistreatment. This could include strengthening legal protections for victims of elder abuse and ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. Collaborating with healthcare professionals, the media, and community representatives is essential to raise awareness of elder abuse and mistreatment to encourage recognition, reporting, and appropriate interventions.

Developing well-regulated and structured care markets is essential to support older people who need care and alleviate the informal care burden while creating much-needed jobs in a region with high unemployment rates. Embracing innovations and preventative interventions to improve the understanding of and access to healthy ageing behaviour in a cultural and gender-sensitive manner.

Improving the social inclusion of older persons in the Middle East requires a collaborative effort from governments, civil society, healthcare providers, the private sector, and the public. The evidence shows that we must act urgently.

Let us work together to promote a society that knows how to translate its values of respecting older persons into meaningful engagement, participation and social inclusion opportunities.

(737 words)