

# Ending gender inequality in older age:

*Guidance for EU development policy*



**HelpAge  
International**

**global network**

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## Key messages

- Gender-based discrimination often intersects with age-based discrimination, creating new and distinct forms of discrimination in older age.
- Gender-based discrimination accumulates over a person's life, often leading to acute marginalisation in older age.
- The human rights challenges faced by older women, in particular, are extremely complex and require specific and dedicated attention.
- The European Union (EU) has made strong policy commitments to gender equality and the rights of girls and women of all ages in its development cooperation. To deliver successfully on these commitments it must now ensure that they are fully implemented and championed in relevant international processes.

## Introduction

There is clear recognition of the importance of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, including in EU and global development cooperation. However, this work frequently overlooks the rights of older people. This is despite rapid global population ageing, with the number of people aged 60 and above projected to reach 1.4 billion by 2030 or 16.5 per cent of the world's population.<sup>1</sup>

Women aged 50 and above are regularly ignored in data collection, yet they account for 24 per cent of the world's women. Older women outnumber older men and their share of the older population increases with age.<sup>2</sup> Older women are more likely to live alone and in poverty.<sup>3</sup>



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From a human rights perspective and in the context of this dramatic demographic trend, understanding gender inequality in older age is critical to ensuring effective gender equality and women's empowerment interventions in development efforts. This briefing by HelpAge's network of independent EU Affiliates explains the nature of gender inequality in older age and looks at how well the EU's development and external action policies on gender equality and women's empowerment currently address these challenges. It provides recommendations on how these policies can be implemented in a way that will benefit all people in older age.

## Impacts of gender-based discrimination in older age

Discrimination based on gender often intersects with discrimination on the grounds of other characteristics, such as age, ability, marital status, race, sexual orientation, class and social status. The intersection of gender- and age-based discrimination results in people being subjected to new and distinct forms of discrimination in older age, and can amplify gender inequality.

For example, older women can be particularly vulnerable to losing their livelihoods due to their lower status, lack of knowledge of their rights, and local laws that prevent them from inheriting property.<sup>4</sup> Employers often regard older women as non-profitable investments for education and vocational training. Older women do not have equal educational opportunities, such as learning how to use information technology.<sup>5</sup> In the provision of financial services, the absence of information on which to base credit or insurance decisions can lead to providers often relying on age as a proxy for risk. Reported "age caps" can be as low as 55, disproportionately disadvantaging women, who, on average, live longer than men.<sup>6</sup>



### Dream of education

**"I had a dream one night that I wanted to further my education. In my dream, my handkerchief opened up and a key appeared. It was the key to my dreams.**

**I wanted to start right from the beginning, from standard 1. Some people were laughing at the sight of me going to school. However, now people just mind their own business.**

**If I had gone to school in my younger days, I would have accomplished a lot. My brothers were the only ones in our family who were educated."**

**Herin, 65, Kenya**

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5. General recommendation No. 27 on older women and protection of their human rights, CEDAW, 2010

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7. Albone R, *Older people count: Making data fit for purpose*, Global AgeWatch policy brief 4, London, HelpAge International, 2014

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Many population-based surveys, such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), only collect data on people between the ages of 15 and 49. Where data is collected on older age groups, it is rarely disaggregated and analysed, as with younger age groups.<sup>7</sup> For example, many surveys on violence against women do not collect data for women aged 50 and above. This means they are ignoring around one third of a woman's lifetime.

Men can face challenges related to their gender as they move into older age. For example, men who have fulfilled a traditional gender role of being the main income earner may lose status and experience a sense of isolation and disempowerment as they transition out of work and into retirement. Interviews with retired men in Bolivia show the loss of their breadwinner role to be a particularly destabilising event, associated with changes in self-image and self-esteem.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of numerous or repeated acts of gender-based discrimination accumulates over a lifetime, often having a devastating effect in older age. For example, the fact

that women often have reduced access to paid work, earn lower wages and are more likely to work in the informal sector means they have less opportunity to contribute to pension schemes.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, large gender gaps exist in income from contributory pensions, with the largest deficits affecting women with children.<sup>10</sup>

Widows can be especially marginalised. Globally, only 43 per cent of women aged 60 and older remain married, compared with 79 per cent of older men.<sup>11</sup> Such high proportions of widows result from the fact that many women, either by tradition or force, marry men older than themselves, and far more widowers than widows remarry.<sup>12</sup> In many countries, due to reliance on their husbands for economic support, a large proportion of older widows struggle without resources and are at risk of isolation and poverty.<sup>13</sup>

### Protecting older women in Tanzania

A new project in Tanzania aims to protect older women from witchcraft-related killings and violence. The EU-supported project implemented by HelpAge International involves a range of stakeholders at local and national level. It includes training older women activists to raise awareness of older women's rights and working with local authorities, community members and civil society to tackle negative attitudes, behaviours and practices.

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11. World Economic Forum, *Global Population Ageing: Peril or Promise?* Chapter 3 (Women and Ageing, Saadia Zahidi), p24, 2012

12. World Economic Forum, *Global Population Ageing: Peril or Promise?*

13. World Economic Forum, *Global Population Ageing: Peril or Promise?*

14. Articles 2, 3 and 21(1) of the Treaty on European Union and Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

15. Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000/C 364/01), the Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015 (COM(2010) 491 final), the European Commission and European External Action Service Joint Staff Working Document, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations 2016-2020*, September 2015 (SWD (2015) 182 final), Council Conclusions on the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015 – 2019, Council of the European Union, 20 July 2015

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20. Commission on the Status of Women, 59th session, Older Women and Beijing 20 years on, E/CN.6/2015/NGO/258, 4 January 2015

21. European Commission Communication, *A decent Life for all: from vision to collective action* 2 June 2014 (pp. 6,8), Council Conclusions on a transformative post-2015 agenda, 16 December 2014 (para 19), European Commission Communication, *A Global Partnership for Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development after 2015*, 5 February 2015 (p.5)

## Gender and older age in EU external policies

Gender equality is a fundamental value enshrined in the EU's core legislative frameworks.<sup>14</sup> The EU promotes the principles of non-discrimination, gender equality and women's empowerment, both within the EU itself and in its external action.<sup>15</sup> The EU's Gender Action Plan 2016-2020 (GAP) aims to achieve concrete results for girls and women of all ages through gender mainstreaming, targeted activities and political dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

The HelpAge EU Network welcomes the emphasis in the GAP on the need to consider the intersection of gender inequality with other inequalities, including age and disability. The consistent references throughout the GAP to women of all ages, including in relation to social protection floors and access to healthcare, are also important. However, the GAP does not explicitly recognise older women's distinct sexual and reproductive health needs nor the impact that harmful practices such as female genital mutilation have on women in older age. These are areas that are often overlooked in development efforts and where further evidence is needed. The GAP also does not refer consistently to women of all ages in relation to the elimination of all forms of violence against girls and women, despite violence against older women being recognised by the Commission on the Status of Women in 2013 as an urgent concern.<sup>17</sup>

In its Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2015-2019, the EU explicitly commits to raising awareness of older people's rights and age discrimination in its external action.<sup>18</sup> It has also committed to stepping up the implementation of obligations to women's rights made in international agreements and legal frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Cairo Declaration on Population and Development, and the Beijing Platform for Action,<sup>19</sup> all of which acknowledge and recommend action to tackle age discrimination and the multiple discrimination that older women face. This is important, given that in most countries of the world, older women continue to be ignored and neglected in the implementation and reporting of these international frameworks.<sup>20</sup>

The EU also reaffirmed its support for gender equality and the empowerment of all women in the development of the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The EU remains fully behind the principle of leaving no one behind in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, referring specifically to older people in a number of its contributions to this debate.<sup>21</sup>

### 3 Ending gender inequality in older age

**HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives.**

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## **New approach to strengthen humanitarian aid**

DG ECHO has pioneered a gender- and age-sensitive aid approach in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. It recognises that the impact of crises is not gender- or age-neutral and that, to ensure that aid is effective, humanitarian assistance must address the specific needs of girls, boys, women and men of all ages. DG ECHO requires that this be achieved in all humanitarian operations it funds through mainstreaming and specific targeted actions where necessary.

In support of this approach, in 2014, DG ECHO introduced the Gender-Age Marker as a tool to assess and track how gender- and age-sensitive humanitarian interventions are. This is an important step forward in EU external policy, recognising that age cannot be treated in isolation from gender in the assessment, implementation and monitoring of interventions.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

**The HelpAge EU network calls on the EU to take full account of global ageing and focus specific and urgent attention on discrimination in older age in its work on gender equality and women's empowerment in its external action.**

**The ambitions set out in the GAP provide opportunities for the EU to be more inclusive of older age in its development cooperation and address gender-based discrimination at all stages of life.**

- We call on the European Commission and the European External Action Service to ensure sufficient capacity and resources to fully implement the GAP, including targeted activities where necessary to address challenges that are specific to older age or particularly affect older people.
- We call on the European Parliament to closely scrutinise the implementation of the GAP and to ensure full attention is given to all stages of life.
- We call on the European Commission and EU Member States to explore how to build capacity and greater coherence in the application of gender markers, ensuring full integration of age in line with the approach taken by DG ECHO's Gender-Age Marker.

**The EU has reaffirmed the commitments in a number of key international frameworks relating to women's rights and is well-positioned to act as a powerful advocate at the global level on these issues.**

- We call on the EU and its Member States to play an active role in encouraging stronger global action to address the failure to implement international frameworks on women's rights with respect to older age.

**The persistent failure to collect data on older age and the lack of evidence relating to gender issues in older age act as a significant barrier to implementing these EU and global frameworks effectively.**

- We call on the EU and its Member States to:
  - make the collection and analysis of sex- and age-disaggregated data essential in all circumstances and invest where necessary in the expansion of data sets to ensure reliable data at all stages of life
  - take into account intersectional and cumulative discrimination in contextual gender analyses
  - remove upper age limits on indicators, including violence against women indicators.