

**Ministerial Conference on Ageing**  
**of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)**  
**in Berlin, 11 to 13 September 2002**

**Plenary Session on 12 September 2002 – General Debate**  
**on behalf of**  
**the accredited non-governmental organizations**

**Statement by Sylvia Meehan, Older Women's Network in Europe**

**Topic: Education and Life Long Learning – Structures to Enable Volunteering:  
Structures for Social Inclusion of Older People**

At this meeting NGO's represent Older people from Vancouver to Vladivostock. We are aware of the needs of older people and also of the expertise and leadership that we contribute in some of the most developed countries in the world, as well as in newly emerging States. When we address the needs of the labour market we must keep in mind needs of and opportunities available to older people. We must recognize the diversity of all individuals -including older ones -and the huge distinct contribution they each can make.

International research studies indicate that older people want and need recognition and support in key areas such as;

- Income levels
- Health, transport and security services, .Good standards of housing
- Access to continuous and lifelong learning, and Representation in all areas of decision-making in local, national and international fora

These needs are reflected in the three priorities set down by the Madrid Plan of Action.

Our years of life have given us a wealth of experience and a capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. Now in the third age of life we have been confronted by exclusion from the labour market and a lack of structures to include us in society.

International research, which was driven by the need to remove gender imbalance in the labour market, revealed the simple truth that governments and society must seek to reconcile the demands and rewards of paid vocational work with unpaid family work.

The work of older people may not always be categorized as 'economic activity,' but the economic activity of a society does not thrive where the intrinsic value of life itself is not celebrated and guarded.

Today NGO's are the forerunners in a movement to combine inclusion in the labour market with social inclusion, and to ensure that older people have a recognized and valued role to play in decision-making. Borrowed from the disability movement, our ethos is, *"Nothing that is about us -Without us"*.

We have had 'The International Year of The Volunteer' and there are calls for an increase in volunteering. Governments should recognize that older people are a valuable resource and are able and willing to contribute, but we cannot do so if the society in which we live does not support our basic needs and governments do not promote quality of life measures.

Recognition by the State of the voluntary sector means:

- Accepting its right to contribute to policy-making
- Acknowledging its autonomy and its right to independence
- Providing it with adequate resources, a financial framework, and systems of consultation

Government initiatives to promote social inclusion should include support for older men and women to participate in the democratic process. Older women make up a high proportion of the older population. They must be asked to contribute to new ideas and policies about future social, economic and political development.

Within the voluntary sector, the rights and justice sub-sector is a starting point for developing social inclusion of asylum seekers, minorities, refugees as well as people from disadvantaged areas. Discriminatory practices and attitudes towards older people must be replaced by positive measures to include us as active participants in civil society.

Voluntary organizations already operate in a cross-cutting and multi-disciplinary way. What is needed is funding to facilitate older people's involvement in policy-making. NGO's recognize the need to increase older people's interest and activity in human rights and democratization. We all need to support educational activities in the areas of human rights, tolerance and the development of positive relationships between distinct groups in an intergenerational and mixed ethnic basis.

Many older people were educationally disadvantaged in early life, so social inclusion measures must include fast track initiatives to bring us into the world of IT and for other life-long learning programmes. In the best examples of community and civil societies, power is shared and given back to the people.

We do have to examine labour force regulation and practices, but policy must not assume that the contribution of older people to society is to be evaluated and supported solely in terms of our economic activity or representation in the paid work force. We have a tremendous potential to contribute to the formation and implementation of new norms in a society where young and old realize that economic health and social health in any society are truly interdependent. In fact you cannot have one without the other.