

30 years after Cairo: The International Conference on Population and Development agenda in a changing world

Panel discussion on inequalities, social inclusion and rights

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Our population is rapidly ageing. By 2050, over 20 per cent of the global population will be 60 years old, or older. Women comprise the majority of older persons, as they tend to live longer than men in all regions, especially at advanced ages.

I will share some reflections on poverty, vulnerability of older persons and of women in particular, due to the intersection between ageing and gender.

Life expectancy in most UNECE countries is actually estimated at 76.2 years for men and 82 years for women.

The gendered difference in longevity means longer lives for women and additional opportunities for further contribution and social participation, but it also means more years living alone, a higher likelihood of disability or illness and increased care needs.

Many older persons are not vulnerable; however, it is important to recognise older persons can be at greater risk of exposure to difficulties, due to personal circumstances such as working in lower skilled, low-paying or precarious employment.

Accumulated disadvantages are particularly likely for older women, due to lower level of education, unpaid work, care responsibilities, pensions gap, or environmental circumstances, like climate change.

Socioeconomic development in the UNECE region has been marked by major disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and other crises in the region, rising inflation and cost-of-living in many countries. As a result, after years of steady decline, the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the European Union increased in 2020 and remains today above pre-pandemic levels. One in five persons are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalized population groups, including older people, women and girls, are particularly affected.

At each stage of life women are more likely than men to face poverty, but gender gaps increase with age, due to the cumulative impacts of lifetime. It is estimated that the impact of the COVID pandemic increased the gender gap by one generation.

Gender inequality in older age is further exacerbated by ageism and age discrimination.

Despite the existence of pension systems in all UNECE member States, there is significant variability in coverage and benefit levels. In addition, persisting discriminatory laws and practices with regard to women's pension rights aggravate the situation. As a result, even among older women receiving a pension, risk of poverty rates is very high in many countries.

In the European Union, for example, the average gender pension gap is estimated to be 37.2 per cent, which is more than twice as high as the gender pay gap of 14.1 per cent.

In Switzerland, 21.6 per cent of male and 29 per cent of female pensioners are at risk of poverty.

One of the most effective means of breaking cycles of poverty and inequality is to ensure universal access to quality education. Considerable progress has been made and global gender parity in youth literacy has nearly been achieved. On the other hand, the situation for the current generation of women over the age of 65 is different, as 27 per cent lack basic literacy skills.

The digital gender divide is also particularly pronounced among older women, due to less exposure to new technologies and skills due to time spent out of the paid labour force in order to carry out caregiving responsibilities

Loneliness and lack of social participation are widespread issues among older persons in the UNECE region; many older persons, and in particular older women, live alone. For instance, in Denmark, Estonia and Finland, more than 50 per cent of older women live alone. The consequences of loneliness and social isolation can be severe, including negative impacts on physical and mental health, increased mortality rates, reduced quality of life, and abuse.

In spite of their vulnerability, it is important to emphasize the intergenerational role of older women as well as their extraordinary resilience in supporting and caring for others while dealing with economic adversity and inadequate social protection. We must make older women visible and recognize their experience and essential contribution to society, to combat harmful and prejudicial gender stereotyping. Older women in leadership positions in politics, business, culture, civil society, academia and other sectors offer powerful examples to challenge persisting and patronising perceptions of passivity and dependence in later age, coupled with assumptions about the traditional family-based caring roles of grandmothers.

Some women also view older age as an opportunity for activism and volunteering. Activist organizations such as Raging Grannies and Knitting Nannas have subverted stereotypes around old age to draw attention to social justice issues and protection of the environment. Older women are important actors and advocates in climate change policies. For example, the association of older women « Klimaseniorinnen » recently took her country - Switzerland - to the European Court of Human Rights arguing that heatwaves caused by climate change were posing a threat to their health and that the climate mitigation policies of the Government were insufficient to protect them from this threat.

We acknowledge the results obtained through many programmes and policies in many countries of the UNECE region to support older persons.

Let's continue our efforts to ensure equal protection of the rights of older persons and in particular of older women. Let's change the paradigm from viewing older persons as beneficiaries of social welfare to viewing them as rights holders and active agents of sustainable development.