

Leave No One Behind: Ageing, Gender and the 2030 Agenda

Ageing is a critical, yet overlooked development issue directly implicating 12.2% of the global population, with currently more than 901 million people aged 60 and older¹. The scale and speed of demographic change compel increased attention to ageing populations, with the number of people aged 60 and above expected to reach 1.4 billion in 2030 and 2 billion in 2050—the majority of whom are living in low-and-middle-income countries².

I. Introduction: Ageing and Sustainable Development

Despite their demographic significance, older persons have been typically unsupported by and invisible in international development programmes, policy, and discourse, and as a result, low-and-middle-income countries have fallen behind in investing in programmes and developing capacities to address the needs of their ageing populations. These needs are wide-ranging, with alarmingly high, yet often unrecorded, rates of poverty among older persons—most particularly, among older women—at the core of the challenges to be most urgently addressed by national policies and enhanced by international development programmes. For example, in developing countries, more than 80% of older persons do not have access to a pension scheme, and older women are the most likely to be among the poorest segments of the population in many countries^{3, 4}. In fragile settings, older persons are at high-risk for being left behind in situations of displacement, and at high vulnerability for violence, abuse, and neglect, as the traditional social order and community cohesion are uprooted in the wake of conflict or disaster.

While development policies for older persons must address ageism and vulnerabilities, there is an equal need to recognize older women and men as agents of change in their communities



Older women in rural Thailand. Judith Escribano/Age International

BOX I. Country Snapshot: Vietnam

The Asia-Pacific region is home to the world's largest number of people over age 60, at around 489 million. In Vietnam, 11% of its population is age 60 and older, and this figure will reach more than 30% by 2050 ([2016 UNDP Asia-Pacific Human Development Report](#)). Like much of the region, poverty among older persons is a challenge that has been exacerbated by a growing share of the elderly living alone as a result of shifting family structures and rural to urban migration—both within countries and across international borders. Support for the financial wellbeing of older persons through government-sponsored, non-contributory pensions is a lifeline. Yet, according to UNFPA, more than 70% of older persons in Vietnam still lack access to a government pension ([Income Security for Older Persons in Viet Nam: Social Pensions Policy Brief](#). ILO & UNFPA, 2014). To address this gap in coverage, UNDP is supporting Vietnam's Master Plan for Social Assistance Reform, which includes a component on social pension and disability benefits for older women and men.

and contributors to national and regional economies. For example, labor force participation among older women has steadily increased since the 1990s, and a significant portion of older adults rely on agricultural work as their primary source of income^{5, 6}. It is common in high, middle, and low-income countries for grandparents to play a vital role in unpaid caregiving for grandchildren, and other relatives, including adults with disabilities, in need of care and support⁷. Development programmes should, therefore, enhance the capabilities of older persons.

Underpinning the exclusion of older persons in national and international social policies is the reality of insufficient data systems, including Health and Household Surveys, particularly in low and middle-income countries. In many cases, data on older women and men is either not collected, with age caps of 49 and 64 limiting the information available to policymakers; or, such data is collected but inadequately reported, disaggregated by gender, or utilized to inform policy. These data gaps not only obscure the challenges older persons face, but also risk excluding older women and men from basic services to which they are entitled.

The objective of this Issue Brief is to raise awareness of the emerging challenges, as well as opportunities, related to ageing and propose initial recommendations for addressing them in the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

II. Ageing, Older Women and the SDGs

With the 2030 Agenda's commitment to "leave no one behind", there is now an unprecedented opportunity to include ageing as a core theme for development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) directly address the concerns of older women and men, by: calling for an end to poverty for all (SDG 1); including targets that lift historic age-caps on data collection for gender-based violence (SDG 5); specifying the right to health "for all at all ages" (SDG3); promoting "lifelong" learning (SDG 6); encouraging the development of sustainable, inclusive, and accessible urban environments, including for older persons (SDG 11); and reducing all forms of violence, including physical, psychological, or sexual violence, among all persons, regardless of age (SDG 16).

UNDP's commitment to gender equality is rooted in the principle that Goal 5—End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere—is a precondition to the success of the 2030 Agenda as a whole. As such, it is important to recognize the compounding impact of age and gender discrimination

on older women, particularly as women comprise majority of the older population, and nearly one-quarter (23.6%) of the world's women is age 50 and older⁸. Across the life course, women are more likely to: be poor; experience violence; have higher rates of illiteracy and innumeracy; acquire a disability; and lack access to adequate nutrition and healthcare⁹. Further, when women are engaged in formal paid employment, they usually face discriminatory practices and attitudes that impact economic security in later life by reducing wages earned or

BOX II. Country Snapshot: Moldova

In Moldova, UNDP, with UN Women and the government of Moldova, worked to bring increased access to basic services and sanitation to underserved, rural area to target vulnerable populations, with an age and gender-sensitive lens. UNDP Moldova targeted older women in particular, noting that "single elderly women are more vulnerable, since they own less property, receive smaller pensions and, are more seriously affected in cases of widowhood, divorce or gender-based violence" Between 2013 and 2015, this project provided 100 older women with access to newly created community laundry services, and more than 130 older women were provided access to quality care services across 4 new multifunctional community centers, furnished in part by the local community through financial donations, donated furniture, library books, and interactive games which transformed the space in a friendly environment for socialization, combatting senior isolation.

For more on this project, see [UNDP Moldova's website](#).



Older women in Moldova wash their clothes. UNDP Moldova.

pensions accrued over a lifetime—unequal pay for equal work, for example, or differential retirement ages than men¹⁰. These disparities persist throughout women and girls' lives and, more often than not, intensify with older age. For example, gendered expectations of caregiving underpin women's lesser access to remunerated employment, amounting to fewer opportunities for independent savings and formal benefits that must be stretched over a longer period of time into older age, as women tend to live longer than men. Poverty in older age is also linked to the greater likelihood of women than men to live alone, which in turn exacerbates their risk for exploitation, violence, and abuse, as well as increased risk for depression and other mental health challenges that can lead to rapid declines in physical health^{11,12}.

III. UNDP'S Role and Policy Recommendations

With a presence in more than 170 countries and territories and a broad development mandate, including a specific directive to work on crisis prevention and recovery and to support the inclusion of marginalized groups and reduce inequalities, UNDP is uniquely poised to ensure that the experiences, needs and contributions of older women and men are mainstreamed throughout development and post-crisis recovery interventions. In particular, UNDP is already engaged in a variety of projects that benefit older women and men, from livelihoods and social protection to gender-based violence and access to justice. Moreover, UNDP plays in lead role within the UN System in promoting and applying an integrated approach for implementing the SDGs – known as MAPS, for Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support – and in advising governments on reporting their progress based on sound data. As such, UNDP is able to provide countries with guidance on how to mainstream ageing, through a gender-responsive approach, into policies and programmes, particularly as they relate to implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda.

The following **key principles** can be adopted by UNDP country offices to ensure that older persons are not left behind:

1. Promotion of participation of older women and men in the planning and implementation of age-responsive policies, including in decision-making, acknowledging the experience and contributions of older persons.
2. Promotion of a change in attitude in and towards older people away from passive recipients of benefits, to active agents of change in their own lives and of those around them.

BOX III. Country Snapshot: India

In India, UNDP is supporting a network of four civil society organizations to increase women's land ownership. As a result of systemic gender oppression, only 12.7% of land holdings in India are in the names of women, though 77% women rely on agriculture as their primary source of income (UNDP India: [Women Become Land Owners](#)). This project has supported women like 65 year-old Basi, shown below holding a deed to land in her name. Married at 15, Basi became a widow at 50 and was accused of witchcraft by relatives seeking to drive her from her land. For many older women like Basi, without any form of social pension, being branded a witch meant being ostracized by the community—abused, then abandoned. This project highlights how UNDP's work to create access to livelihoods and tackle discriminatory customary practices, also responds to gender-based violence.



An older woman holds a deed of land in her name. UNDP India.

3. Promotion of gender equality, social inclusion and women's empowerment in all activities, including the recognition that gender inequalities accumulate across the life course and often result in differing levels of welfare between older women and men; this means that development responses to ageing must be gender-sensitive and with a life-course perspective.

Options for policy approaches include:

- Examining countries' existing and proposed legislation to revise or remove laws that discriminate against individuals based on age, including laws that provide differential treatment to older women than older men,

such as different ages for retirement in civil service positions that require women to leave the workforce at a younger age (**SDGs 1 and 5**).

- Working with governments to revise existing laws on inheritance, land rights, and tenure of property to ensure that women are not excluded from the right to own land or hold property under their own name (see **Box III** and **SDGs 1, 5 and 8**).
- Ensuring that National Action Plans on Violence against Women or gender-based violence (GBV) address violence throughout the life course, including older women as a key population impacted by intimate partner and sexual violence, as well as elder abuse and harmful practices against widows (**SDGs 5 and 16**).
- Supporting Ministries of Health to train providers administering critical services, such as HIV testing, to change stigmatizing attitudes that act as barriers for older persons to access care, as well as develop a set of core competencies to recognize and care for basic conditions of ageing, such as certain forms of chronic illness, arthritis, and mental health (**SDG 3**).
- Enhancing the capacity of national statistical offices to collect age and gender-disaggregated data to report on all goals, and make special efforts for women past age 49, ensuring that data and evidence on older persons underpins inclusive policy making (**SDGs 5 and 17**).
- Working with National Labor Commissions, municipal governments, and the private sector, to encourage livelihoods programs and continued learning opportunities for older workers and their professional development (**SDGs 1, 4 and 8**).
- Designing social protection measures that are accessible to all and sensitive to the needs of older people. Some of these measures include cash transfers; support for caregivers of children, grandchildren, and older or ailing relatives; universal health coverage; disability and old age pensions (see **Box I**, **Box II**, and **SDGs 1, 3 and 5**).
- Collaborating with non-governmental organizations and civil society to ensure that the concerns of older persons are effectively addressed, for example, through older citizen monitoring (see **Box III**).

References & Additional Resources

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