



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

#### Fifty-seventh session

4-15 March 2013

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives**

**Statement submitted by AARP, Gray Panthers, HelpAge International, International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, International Health Awareness Network, International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and International Longevity Center Global Alliance, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



## Statement

We, the above-named non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, mindful of its resolution 1996/31, which calls for NGOs to support the purpose and principles of the Charter of the United Nations in achieving equality of women and men, through our participation in the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women with its thematic focus on the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls and with the priority of prevention and the development of support services for victimized girls and women of all ages, call upon all United Nations bodies, States and civil society to acknowledge fully that older women endure acts of violence, abuse and exploitation, in violation of their human right to live lives of dignity free of abuse, as stated in the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, ratified by the General Assembly in 1991 (General Assembly resolution 46/91, annex).

Older women face age discrimination. They also face the cumulative effects of gender discrimination throughout their lives, including less access to education and health services, lower earning capacity and limited access to rights to land ownership, contributing to their vulnerability in older age, according to the 2012 report by the United Nations Population Fund and HelpAge International *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century*. The combination of age and sex discrimination also puts older women at increased risk of violence and abuse. Data on elder abuse of women are limited; however, prevalence studies in some countries suggest that over 10 per cent of women experience abuse and exploitation in old age. Elder abuse is defined by the World Health Organization as physical, sexual and psychological abuse, financial exploitation, neglect and abandonment. The loss of a spouse can also make women more vulnerable; older women are more likely to be widowed than older men and less likely to remarry. Widows and unmarried women can be particularly vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. Field studies by HelpAge International, documented by Bridget Sleep (2012), have identified patterns of violence against older women accused of witchcraft and murdered or stripped of possessions and property.

UNFPA issued a report in 2012 that shows older people age 60 years and older are increasing dramatically as a proportion of the world's population, and numerically and proportionally older women are increasing more rapidly than older men. The cumulative disadvantages experienced by older women owing to a lifetime of gender discrimination, along with the likelihood that older women will suffer from disabling chronic diseases and that those who are widowed or unmarried will lack spouse/family caregivers, place older women at great risk of violence and abuse in old age, according to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences.

Two United Nations documents identify the specific vulnerabilities of older women with respect to violence and exploitation; the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002 and general recommendation No. 27 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on older women and the protection of their human rights. In the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing, older women are identified as especially vulnerable to abuse owing to poverty and other vulnerabilities. General recommendation No. 27 affirms the utility of a life-cycle approach that recognizes and addresses the different stages of women's lives and the

impact of each on the enjoyment of human rights by older women. It identifies as a special area of concern the particular vulnerability of older women to exploitation and abuse, including economic abuse, and notes that some laws particularly discriminate against older widows, and that some widows are victims of “land grabbing”. An important recommendation focuses on violence: States parties have an obligation to draft legislation recognizing and prohibiting violence, including domestic, sexual violence and violence in institutional settings, against older women, including violence committed as a result of traditional practices and beliefs.

### **Gaps**

General recommendation No. 27 received the support of the General Assembly; however, it is non-binding.

The Madrid Plan of Action against Ageing was adopted by consensus; however, it is also non-binding. As laudable as these documents are, they are not enforceable in international law. This presents a clear gap in the protection of older women from violence and abuse.

### **Recommended actions**

To address this gap, we call on the Commission, the United Nations and civil society to seek a stronger human rights document (such as a binding international treaty) for the human rights of older persons, older women and widows.

This document should also seek to:

- Promote respect for the rights of older women to benefit society as a whole
- Recognize that the number of older women in the world is growing at an unprecedented rate
- Protect older women, who are highly vulnerable to abuse, deprivation and exclusion
- Promote a dedicated international protection regime for older women’s rights
- Ensure that older women’s rights are no longer neglected in the current binding human rights framework
- Address inconsistencies in national protection of older women’s human rights
- Ensure that regional and international human rights instruments and mechanisms complement and strengthen each other.