



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-second session

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

### **Statement submitted by Association for Women’s Career Development in Hungary and International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

### Neglect, Abuse and Violence Against Older Women

The International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) calls on the Commission on the Status of Women at its 62nd Session to join ageing advocates around the world to promote a binding document for the human rights of older people. Older women, in particular, lack international protections against human rights abuses, including protections against neglect, abuse and violence, and rural older women are particularly vulnerable.

Older women remain invisible to the international domestic violence community due to a toxic intersectionality of age and gender. This results in stereotypes that prevent inclusion in international studies on abuse in later life, conceal impact of harmful traditional practices, and minimize denial of right to inherit and own land and other violations of civil and human rights that lead to material deprivation in old age. Use of life stage cohort analysis obscures patterns of social exclusion across the lifespan of girls and women of all ages such as access to health care and education, lack of adequate nutrition, lack of reproductive health, lack of workplace protections. These culminate in lack of desperately needed social protections for widows of all ages and both single and married older women. Rural older women are particularly vulnerable to these policy gaps. Harmful stereotypes perpetuated in the media of older women help to minimize and justify these abusive practices.

United Nations research guidelines on studies of domestic violence include language suggesting that States Parties do not need to include older women subjects, because older women's memories are faulty, and even if intact they do not like to remember unpleasant life experiences and will not share them with researchers. As a result, international studies on domestic violence do not include data on older women (50 years and older) and abuse, leading to a false perception that only younger women are subjected to violence from intimate partners and others. Key forms of abuse like financial exploitation and neglect, as well as abuse perpetrated by family members other than spouse/partners, are often not included as variables in international domestic violence studies. These gaps further minimize abuse of older women and falsely suggest that abuse, including sexual violence, solely affects younger women. Although less than 10 per cent of older women reside in care facilities, even in developed countries where institutional services are widely available, some researchers state that older women are not included in domestic violence studies because research budgets do not allow for interviews in nursing homes. If we are to address the 62nd Session of the CSW's priority theme, "challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls", this ageist and discriminatory attitude must end.

In some mostly rural areas of the world, and in some urban areas as well, older women are targeted as witches, and these accusations protect community members who commit violence against older women. Insular policies fail to punish perpetrators, and some countries conceal these crimes by removing older women targeted as witches to camps, ostensibly for their protection but with the consequence of stripping them of home, possessions and means of support. Failure of governments to punish perpetrators, restore justice to victims and engage in community education leads to perpetuation of this senseless violence in the name of "respecting" traditional practices. Government support of family members who strip widows of property and

land ownership, withhold needed benefits and place widows of all ages in dependent and vulnerable positions in society including extreme social exclusion needs to be ended.

Tied to perpetuation of harmful traditional practices targeting older women and widows of all ages are laws and customs that prevent older women and widows from owning land by discriminating against women in favour of men in the community and family. Land rights need to be established for women of all ages, with special consideration for widows of all ages and older women heads of households or living alone. Local tribunals funded by government can be trained and empowered to enforce these laws and policies, leading to policies that protect and empower older women and widows of all ages. Widowhood rites must be abolished and Human Rights of widowed women must be advanced.

Life stage analysis of girls and women of all ages obscures the cumulative impact of disadvantages that result from social exclusion across the life course, particularly in older age. Older women who have been denied adequate nutrition, health care, education, marital protections, reproductive healthcare, work opportunities that include opportunities to combine family care and work, with pension and health benefit protections, are particularly vulnerable to poverty and ill health in older age. Social protection including economic support later in life is critical to compensate for inadequate protections across the life course for older women. Older women are often pressed to care for grandchildren, aging spouses and other family members, and are not only denied support for this work but are denied support and care at the end of life for their own needs.

What can be done at the international level of ensure justice and rights for older women and widows of all ages? One important step is ratifying a binding instrument like a Convention for the rights of older people with specific language specifying protections of older women. To date a General Recommendation (No. 27) under the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women has been promulgated related to older women, and two International Plans of Action on Ageing (Vienna and Madrid) have been disseminated and adopted by all member states of the UN. However, these are not binding (soft law) and serve as recommendations to member states, not legally binding documents.

The International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) strongly supports needed visibility for older women and widows of all ages and a staunch international stance in promoting justice and rights. INPEA calls on UN-Women and its affiliated NGOs to join NGOs advocating for the rights of older people and UN Member States to become active in the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing and join the fight for a binding instrument to promote the rights of older people — including older women who comprise over half the more than 2 billion older people in the world — and promote and protect the right of ALL women and girls to live lives of dignity, free of violence and abuse.

The article entitled Challenges Facing Older Women, by Phumzile lambo-Ngcuka, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN-Women, published in the International AARP's The Journal (2016) is an excellent resource for referencing the need to promote human rights of older women.