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peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by International Council on Social Welfare, a non-governmental organization 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The International Council on Social Welfare is one of the oldest non-governmental organizations with a global reach. It promotes social protection and gender equality for women and girls of all ages. The International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse is the only recognized non-government organization that focuses exclusively on addressing neglect, abuse, and violence against older people. Our joint statement aims at highlighting an important nexus between gender and ageing, and the plight of older women. The choices and trade-offs women make have a tremendous impact on families, communities, and societies at large. At the same time, we believe that comprehensive and holistic social policy implemented at the national level where gender aspects are mainstreamed plays a vital role in empowering women and girls, bringing closer sustainable and resilient societies.

The world is ageing at an unprecedented pace, with greater numbers of women living to older age. Generally, women live longer than men by an average of five years, but this does not mean they are all living their later lives in good health and adequately resourced.

Twenty-five years ago, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognized age discrimination as a barrier to women's empowerment and advancement. Older women were specifically mentioned with regard to poverty, health, experiences of family violence, obstacles faced in entering the labor market, and discrimination at work. Achieving the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action will require affirmative actions to recognize, promote, and protect older women's rights to achieve full gender equality and women's empowerment.

Despite older women accounting for 54 per cent of the global population aged 60 years, and 61 per cent of those aged 80 years and above, they are too often ignored, invisible, subject to ageism, and routinely denied their rights to health, decent work, housing, lifelong learning, social protection, and the power to make life choices. Older women suffer from the stigma and myths of ageing that paint a misleading picture of frailty and dependence. Gender policy and implementation must consider not just older women's needs and concerns, but also recognize, value, and support their capacities, competencies, and contributions to family, community and society.

A life-course perspective on economic and social policy is needed to highlight and address cumulative disadvantages that women face as they age. These include discrimination, ageism, and prevalence of family and intimate partner violence and abuse. Gender-sensitive economic and social policy planning require recognition of older women not only as recipients of services, but also as valuable resources. Older women are often at the centre of their households and communities and are not just recipients of care, but key providers of care to family, friends, and community – work that is too often uncompensated and unacknowledged.

Structural disadvantages

Cumulative disadvantages over the life course for women and girls contribute to high levels of poverty in later life, especially for women who live alone. While interventions at earlier ages can help mitigate this, accessible and adequate social protection systems, including floors and affordable health care must be available for all older women.

While everyone has the right to education, many older women, particularly those who have not had educational opportunities in their youth because of class and gender discrimination, lack adequate education. This inhibits their full participation in everyday activities that require reading, writing, and technology skills, and

constrains full participation in public and political life. Discrimination in education at all levels based on age as well as gender and/or disability must be eliminated.

International development programmes, policy, and discourse often overlook older women's economic contributions to family and community. There is an intersectionality of ageism, sexism, and toxic stereotyping that particularly disadvantages older women. A glaring example is the denial of employment opportunities because of age. Time and again we see only the conflation of old age and frailty/dependency, which provides a misleading picture of women in later life. Most older women are active and engaged with their families and communities, providing essential support for primary wage earners and primary care for older and younger dependants. Properly recognizing the worth of unpaid care work is essential to the economy and to individuals' health and well-being, and has been widely identified as key to tackling systemic inequalities that constrain all women. Women and girls must have equal access to resources and opportunities.

Older women and health

Non-communicable diseases including dementia, arthritis, diabetes, cognitive decline, and other chronic conditions occur disproportionately in older age, affecting older women particularly. Post-menopausal conditions including osteoporosis can disproportionately affect older women and, without adequate treatment, lead to otherwise preventable disabilities. Health services for HIV prevention should be available to women of all ages to prevent infection and alleviate burden on older women providing care to family members who are ill or orphaned by HIV.

Violence against older women

Elder abuse and neglect are rampant but often overlooked. Because domestic violence prevalence surveys routinely fail to include subjects over the age of 49, they present misleading findings that suggest older women are not subjected to violence by intimate partners or family members. Domestic violence prevalence researchers focusing on older women demonstrate that it is as high as 38 per cent in some European Union countries and have developed methodologies for estimating older women's life-course rates of violence, which are found to exceed 20 per cent. This also considers the trauma that older women are forced to live with when the violence they experience throughout their lives is unacknowledged and/or dismissed as negligible or of little consequence. Armed conflict as well as conditions created by natural disasters and poor economic conditions may result in forced migration, which comprises significant numbers of older women, who are among the most vulnerable groups of displaced persons. Studies by HelpAge International and other international aid organizations document that sexual and physical violence against older women, as well as forced homelessness, poverty, and hunger, can result from displacement and conflict.

Human rights

Older women's voices are rarely asked for or heard in national policy development. Given the scale and speed of ageing in all countries of the region and the increasing numbers of older women, this is a significant policy failure.

The gap between the existence of legal rights and the effective enjoyment of them by women in older age derives from lack of commitment by governments' duty bearers – to promote and protect older women rights holders, and the failure of governments and other stakeholders to inform them about these rights. The lack of appropriate recourse mechanisms at national and international levels, and inadequate resources at both levels, compound the problem. Age is not one of the forms of discrimination that is explicitly mentioned in the Convention on the Elimination of

all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, General recommendation No. 27 on the rights of older women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010 is non-binding, as is the Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, adopted by the United Nations in 2002.

Older women and the media

Ageism is an invidious structural barrier facing all older people, marginalizing and excluding them in their communities and negatively impacting their health, well-being, and dignity. However, the intersectionality of age and gender often portrayed in the media creates an especially challenging and noxious barrier for older women, as it combines stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination not only on the basis of age but also gender. Older women are not a homogenous group. Some are vulnerable and in need of assistance and care, much like any other group, no matter their age. Many are active, healthy, and vibrant contributors to their families, communities, and society, lead independent and autonomous lives, and are active agents of change. The media have an important role to play in correcting these negative stereotypes, rather than amplifying them.

Older women and the environment

Having access to a sustainable environment and decent living conditions is a fundamental human right. Although older women serve important roles as managers, consumers, and producers at the household level, they have been largely absent at the level of environmental policymaking and decision-making. This is despite the specialized knowledge they may have about ecological linkages and fragile ecosystems. Older women who are isolated, living alone, or unable to live independently often suffer from lack of basic housing and clean water. Man-made and natural disasters, as well as the impact of climate change leading to desertification, have a devastating impact on rural older women in particular.

Age-disaggregated data

Data collection remains an integral part of evidence-based and rights-focused policymaking and must reflect diversity among older persons, similar to that of other cohorts. The denial of older women's rights is compounded by inadequate data on women beyond age 49. Disaggregated data by age, gender, and disability beyond age 49 is not routinely collected or available. Few prevalence studies on domestic violence against women within population-based studies include women older than 49 in samples. Increased participation by and support of national statistical offices on age-related data is recommended. The need for age-disaggregated data, particularly in light of the increasing numbers of older women, is essential to integral policymaking. At the same time, there were gaps, including the complete omission of widows and widowhood.

Statistics and data collection that are disaggregated by age, gender, and disability will facilitate decision-making for legislation, policies, and programmes, and also highlight and help address cumulative discriminatory practices and disadvantages faced by older women. This life-course approach recognizes intergenerational solidarity for improving the lives and dignity for women of all ages, everywhere, and views older women not as burdens on the state, but as rights holders for age-inclusive policy planning and service delivery.

The way forward

Member States must ensure, in the context of the twenty fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the equal rights of all women and girls across the life course in line with the principles and standards of international human

rights treaties. Older women must be better protected by legislation and public policies that are aligned with human rights principles and standards, have a life-course perspective, are age-inclusive, tackle ageism and address older women's rights and needs.

Well-being, thriving economies, and sustainable development that protect people and the planet require full involvement and attention of women of all ages, protection of their rights and agency, and active participation in society. Ageism coupled with gender discrimination is a key driver of social and economic discrimination and inequalities in older age, denying older women their rights and restricting the potential of millions of women now and in the future.

Affordable, quality, person-centred, and accessible health and social services including long-term care for all older women is essential. Women must be present in all planning and decision-making processes, and have information on their rights and entitlements.

To build a sustainable future for us and for the next generations we must combine efforts of all stakeholders, women and girls of all ages, together with men and boys. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its pledge of creating a more equitable world where no one is left behind is a task of unprecedented magnitude and complexity. But the development we want will only be sustainable if it is inclusive and gender-sensitive, with a fairer distribution of opportunities and resources.
