

Key issues and recommendations made at the CEDAW Committee informal meeting with UN agencies, funds and programmes, NGOs and stakeholders on a general recommendation on older women and protection of their rights

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Introduction

This public meeting provided an opportunity for the CEDAW Committee and UN agencies, funds and programmes, NGOs and other stakeholders to identify key areas where the protection of older women's rights needs to be enhanced and make recommendations on key issues the working group should consider as they draft the GR.

CEDAW Committee member and chair of the working group on the general recommendation (GR), Ms Ferdous Ara Begum, introduced the general recommendation outlining key points from the concept note on the general recommendation CEDAW/C/2009/II/WP.1/R available at:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/cedaws44.htm>

Statements were made by representatives from the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Statements were also made by the following NGOs: The NGO Committee on the Status of Women's Sub-Committee on Older Women (SCOW), the Gray Panthers, HelpAge International, Global Action on Aging, the Greater Rochester Partnership for the Elderly, Human Rights Watch and the Timor-Leste National Women's Network.

Comments were made by the following Committee members: Ms Soledad Murillo de la Vega, Ms Meriem Belmihoub-Zerdani and Ms Yoko Hayashi.

Recognition of the right of older women to live lives of dignity

Underpinning the comments and recommendations was recognition of the fact that older women have the right to live in dignity. The contribution that they have made throughout their lives to their families, communities and society needs to be better recognised and their rights protected.

Support for the general recommendation

Strong support for the drafting of the general recommendation was expressed by Committee members, UN agencies and NGOs. Dr. Carolyn Hannan, Director, Division for the advancement of women expressed her strong support for this initiative by the CEDAW Committee. In addition, appreciation was expressed for the persistent efforts of the NGOs who have been urging appropriate action by the UN on older women's issues for the past 10 years. In turn NGOs expressed their encouragement and support to the CEDAW Committee and Ms Begum for their work on the general recommendation and drew attention to the impact that this work is already having on ensuring that the present debate around the need for a new convention on the rights of older people has a strong gender perspective. They urged the swift adoption of the general recommendation.

It was hoped that general recommendation would encourage the Committee to systematically ask States Parties to include how they are implementing the Convention in relation to older women in the periodic reports and encourage the use of the optional protocol to address the rights of older women. The general recommendation was also seen as an important tool to encourage those working on ageing to develop a stronger gender analysis to their work and those working on women's issues to address ageing and ageism and ageing.

Key issues raised

A number of issues were raised in addition to those areas addressed by Ms Begun in the concept note (see above). It was highlighted that the gendered aspects of ageing are well recognised and that the importance of gender relations calls for a life-cycle approach.

Attention was drawn to the specific issues faced by older women living in areas of conflict and older displaced and stateless women. They are often unable to flee persecution or conflict and often have difficulty making asylum claims due to illiteracy. Asylum procedures need to be both age and gender sensitive. Older women's access to health care may be denied due to lack of legal status, documentation, distance of facilities, language or cultural barriers. They may suffer from post traumatic stress disorder, their reproductive health care is ignored and their social support networks may disintegrate. Older women are often left behind in refugee camps when others return to their homes and they are not included in peace building efforts. Older women can also be victims of rape and sexual violence in post-conflict situations.

The fact that older women are not a homogenous group and the need to address the complex nature of intersectional discrimination was raised by a number of speakers. The general recommendation was seen as playing an important part of the Committee's work in addressing the multi-dimensional nature of discrimination.

The issue of the disproportionate need of older women for palliative care was raised and attention drawn to the unnecessary physical and psychological suffering that is the result of lack palliative care.

It was recognised that many older women have been negatively impacted by the economic crisis and the need to ensure that responses by states to the crisis do not undermine welfare systems was highlighted. Attention was drawn to the need to recognise the unpaid care that older women provide which enables states to continue functioning.

Recommendations to the working group

The working group on the general recommendation was asked to address the following in its drafting of the general recommendation:

- The importance of framing the general recommendation in a life-cycle approach.
- The scope and extent of discrimination on the working lives of women and the impact this has in old age.
- The persistence and impact of de jure discrimination on older women.
- The prevalence of violence against women and how this is exacerbated by age-related abuse.
- The impact of negative stereotypes of older women.
- To relate the application of the convention to existing international policies
- The need for legal frameworks to remove and prohibit age and sex-based discrimination in the workplace.
- The difficulties faced by displaced older women due to lack of documentation and statelessness.
- The disproportionate need of older women for palliative care to improve the quality of their lives.
- The need to highlight the intersectional nature of discrimination and States obligations under Article 2.
- The importance of considering general comments by other treaty bodies eg CESCR General Comment 20 on discrimination.