



Older Women Count!

The Right to Economic Security

Older women are at high risk of poverty, especially those who live alone, are widowed, divorced or have disabilities and those caring for vulnerable young people orphaned by AIDS.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has led to a dramatic increase in the number of poor households headed by grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa.

Less than 1 in 5 older people in sub-Saharan Africa receive a social “old-age” pension.

Social pensions have been shown to be an effective, low-cost tool to reduce poverty and invest in human capital development. They also reduce inter-generational poverty since grandmothers use their money to support younger generations. Pensions that depend on chronological age alone can be problematic. For example, where the eligibility age is 70, pensions do not help younger grandmothers who are often caring for 5 or more young people.

Universal social pensions, therefore, need to be part of a wider package of social protection measures that include access to free age-friendly healthcare, lifesaving medicines, education and lifelong learning, and to child and disability grants, community social-assistance funds and credit schemes.

Our country created protections for grandmothers. There are pensions, foster care grants and stipends for home-based care workers. To see these measures put in place to protect our rights, gave us hope that our burden would be less heavy. But they are not working. When it can take years for a foster care grant to be processed, when grandmothers have to travel long distances to visit government offices who turn them away again and again, when pensions are hopelessly inadequate and don't start until 60, then we are dealing with a system that is in desperate need of change. ... South African Grandmothers Statement, 2016

Economic security refers to “an assured and stable standard of living that provides individuals and families with a level of resources and benefits necessary to participate economically, politically, socially, culturally, and with dignity in their community's activities”. Advocates for social justice argue that the persistence of extreme poverty, inequality and vulnerability are symptoms of social injustice and inequality, and see social security and social protection as a right of citizenship.



In sub-Saharan Africa inheritance laws and customs often deny older women the right to own or inherit land and property.

Even when laws are in place, older women frequently do not have the knowledge or money they need to gain access to property, or they face community backlash for exercising their rights. In patriarchal, customary systems land and property rights belong to the males of her husband's family. Although a widow may be allowed to continue to live in her marital home and farm the land, she does not own the land, cannot inherit it and lives there at the goodwill of her husband's family. Such goodwill is often not present. Land grabbing (sometimes accompanied by violence) by family members is common.

Gender inequalities underlie property and land ownership, inheritance and use. Older women become increasingly vulnerable to landlessness, homelessness, marginalization and food insecurity. Under International Human Rights Law, women and men are entitled to equal protection of their property rights!

Leaving no-one behind is critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

If we are to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty we must have a strong focus on sub-Saharan Africa with deliberate attention to the often unrecognized, uncounted and frequently unpaid older women and grandmothers who are caring for the next generation of African youth, and sustaining their communities with little or no support and social protection.

We must be protected from land grabbing and our property rights guaranteed; not just on paper but in reality. Our efforts to secure livelihoods for our families must be supported. Economic opportunities should be expanded for those of us still able to work, and social benefits extended to those who cannot. Protection from theft is essential, as well as greater access to credit and markets. ... Ugandan Grandmothers Statement, 2016

Recognizing and supporting older women/grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa as caregivers and contributors is essential to sustainable development.

The costs of full-time caregiving are high—affecting one's pocket-book and on one's health. Despite this, the grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa carry on, finding innovative ways to support each other and care for vulnerable people in their families and communities. Through caregiving and other work, such as farming, market selling and providing services, older women are making a substantial contribution to the economy and sustainability of their communities. They need to be engaged and empowered, and recognized for this work and the love they bring to their families and communities. They are not victims but agents of change.



Sources

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