



Older Women Count!

The Rights of Older Women in sub-Saharan Africa

Older women face double or triple jeopardy. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), older women/grandmothers are raising millions of young people orphaned by AIDS. With courage and persistence, they are leading their communities and advocating for their rights. Yet these older women face discrimination associated with both age and gender. Other factors such as disability, low-income status and the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS can accelerate this discrimination. Like older women all over the world, their contributions and needs often remain invisible to decision-makers and international agencies.

In low-income countries, the challenge of invisibility is exacerbated by a lack of data. For example, very little or no data is collected on HIV status and the experience of violence for women after age 49. In other cases, data is extremely limited and/or not disaggregated by age and sex. Older women are denied basic services and protection of their rights because they are absent from official records and are invisible to policy-makers and organizations providing development assistance.

How Old is “Older?”

The UN refers to older people as age 60 and above. In many countries, policies and programs distinguish “older women” as those who are past the reproductive stage of life (age 50). It is important to

view aging and “older” as a culmination of life experiences and transitions, and to ask women themselves how they perceive being “older” in various cultures and communities.

Aging may also constitute a continuum of independence, interdependence and dependence. Grandmothers in Africa are dealing with all of these stages as they support themselves and each other, and care for young people, middle-aged people who are ill, and older people in their families and communities.

Grandmothers/older women face violations to their rights in five fundamental areas. These become pillars for action:

Pillar 1: Education and Lifelong Learning:

Older women are the most likely to have had limited or no access to education while growing up. Their right to lifelong learning and adult education is often ignored or denied.

Pillar 2: Health:

Often, older women do not have access to required medicines and affordable, age-friendly health and social services, including support for preventing and treating HIV/AIDS and for caring for others who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. Many suffer from untreated chronic problems and diseases such as high blood pressure and arthritis. Many do not have the basic resources required for health (e.g. nutritious food, clean water and

adequate, safe housing).

Pillar 3: Freedom from Violence: Many older women are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological violence, financial abuse, abusive traditional practices (such as wife inheritance) and neglect.

Pillar 4: Economic Security/Social Protection: Older women are often denied their right to decent work, and to property and inheritances that rightfully belong to them. Very few have access to pensions and other social protection measures such as credit schemes and affordable healthcare.

Pillar 5: Human Rights, Equality and Full Participation: Invisibility, a lifetime of gender inequality and ageism is behind much of older women's struggle to enjoy their rights and fully participate in elected assemblies, decision-making bodies and the development process.

“Older women like me, and girls growing up now in Uganda, both face challenges. We can work together for the betterment of all women and girls. With the support of younger generations, older female leaders like me can advocate for greater equality and empower the girls of today.” ...
Margaret Kabango, Ugandan activist, age 72

Protect and Promote the Rights of Grandmothers/Older Women

1. Take a lifecourse, feminist and rights-based approach that emphasizes older women/grandmothers and supports intergenerational solidarity.
2. Count older women in. Ensure that all data collection includes people over the age of 50, and that all data are disaggregated by sex and age.
3. Recognize that older women/grandmothers are key agents of development. Support their crucial roles as caregivers, heads of households, community leaders and contributors to the economy. Support community organizations and grandmother groups that are leading the way and advocating for their rights.
4. Press for gender equality **at all ages** and the inclusion of older women in international and domestic policies and programs.
5. Monitor and comment on Canada's budget for international development assistance and our contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals on poverty and equality, especially as it relates to older women.
6. Leave no-one behind. Provide a strong focus on SSA with deliberate attention to the often unrecognized, uncounted and mostly unpaid grandmothers and older women who are caring for the next generation of African youth and sustaining their communities with little or no support.
7. Include older women/grandmothers in the HIV/AIDS response. Increase funding and scale up effective programs that specifically include grandmothers/older women in SSA and the young people in their care who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.
8. Support the development and passage of a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.
9. Spread the word! Be an active voice for the rights of older women.