

Older Women Count!

The Right to Health

Older people in sub-Saharan Africa face a double burden of disease. There is a high level of communicable disease in sub-Saharan Africa, which accounts for 90% of malaria deaths and more than 70% of all people living with HIV. At the same time, older Africans experience high rates of non-communicable diseases including hypertension, depression, musculoskeletal problems, vision impairment, functional disability, nutritional deficiencies, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

HIV and AIDS. There are 24.7 million people living with HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa, including 6 million young people, and an estimate of more than 2.5 million people aged 50-plus. There is a lack of data on women over age 49, and older women are the least likely to get tested for HIV/AIDS or to have access to treatment. It is estimated that globally, 74% of new cases of HIV among people aged 50-plus are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Access to medicines is a significant issue, with affordability the key barrier. There is a need to get affordable generic medicines to sub-Saharan Africa. Out-of-pocket expenses for HIV/AIDS testing and treatment for grandmothers and the young people in their care need to be eliminated. Affordable access to antiretroviral therapy and other medicines, including vaccines, needs to be improved, as does access to assistive devices related to disability and vision and hearing problems.

Older women need access to an age-friendly healthcare system that acknowledges their needs and strengths, and treats them with the dignity they deserve.

Few healthcare policies, programs and guidelines address the specific health needs of older people or the situation of older people caring for others. Currently, much of this kind of care is voluntarily provided by older women/grandmothers. They need recognition, training and compensation for this important work.

“As older women, we face challenges that are still ignored. The health system is failing us and HIV-positive grandmothers have special needs that are not met. We wait in lines at clinics for hours, meet with healthcare workers who are often uncaring and do not have the medication we need.” ... 2016 South African Grandmothers Statement

Sustainable Development Goal 3 is “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”. However, the indicators for measuring health often exclude older people. For example, the targets for preventing non-communicable diseases do not include people over age 70, and most surveys on HIV status do not include women over age 49. Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) is also an essential health goal.

We can protect and enhance older women’s right to health.

1. Count older women in. Include older women (over age 50) when collecting and using data and information on HIV/AIDS prevention, infection, treatment, and care. Ensure that all data on health is disaggregated by gender and age.

2. Inform civil society, governments, students and international agencies about the health issues faced by older women/grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa. Be a voice for older women in local, national and international forums.

3. Recognize and support the contribution of older women as caregivers. Address the special needs of grandmother-headed households, and children orphaned or made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS in countries at high risk, with direct special assistance in sub-Saharan Africa.

4. Support campaigns, programs and legislation that:

- Prohibit discrimination against people living with HIV and AIDS
- Halt the alarming increase in HIV infection occurring among young women age 15 to 24, and address their reproductive health needs
- Include grandmothers as a key target population in national and international plans to scale up access to HIV and AIDS treatment
- Develop and finance community groups that address the challenges older women face in accessing treatment and caring for others infected and affected by HIV/AIDS
- Eliminate all out-of-pocket costs for HIV and AIDS testing and treatment.

5. Press for increased funding in the AIDS response: e.g. Global Fund to Fight to AIDS, TB and Malaria, and in Canada's international assistance programs.

6. Partner with organizations working in access to medicines, and aging and health. Advocate improved access to affordable life-saving medicines and vaccines for all.

Engage in activities to:

- Prevent the acceptance of restrictive international trade laws that limit access to affordable medicines
- Enable African states, international funding programs and humanitarian organizations to purchase and distribute lower-cost medicines, vaccines and assistive devices such as eyeglasses, hearing aids and mobility assisting devices.

7. Support policies and programs that address:

- Older women living with disabilities and those who need long-term care
- Universal health care, affordable transportation and age-friendly health services.

8. Advocate for policies and programs that address older women and non-communicable diseases (e.g. diabetes) and conditions associated with older age (e.g. cataracts and mobility problems).

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