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WHITE PAPER: Women and Aging

“How does society look at old women? We are considered ‘others,’ not deserving of equal consideration. Even before we got old, we faced many injustices. There is ageism, stereotyping and discrimination because persons are old. It is a double bind, being a woman and being old. It makes elder women devalue themselves and accept domination as ‘normal.’ We become invisible and are not relevant. The media portrays us as poor, weak or incompetent. We feel powerless in controlling our own representation.”

[-- Agenda for Action: Building a Movement for Elder Women’s Advocacy \(The Women’s Foundation of California\)](#)

OVERVIEW

The world’s population is now aging at an unprecedented rate. People today are living longer and generally healthier lives, representing the triumph of public health, medical advancement, and economic development over disease and injury. By 2050, the worldwide population over 60 will reach 1.2 billion people.¹ Two-thirds of them will be residents of developing countries.² Worldwide, people aged 65 and over will soon outnumber children under age 5 for the first time in history.³

Where do women fit into these statistics? And why is it important to consider the challenges of women who are aging? For one, women live longer than men. The majority of older persons (55 percent) worldwide are women. Among the oldest old (a sub-group of the elderly population that researchers often use to refer to persons 85 years or older), 64 percent are women.⁴ And while aging women face the same health, economic and social issues of all the elderly, they have more challenges unique to gender. These include concerns around health care; economic security; retirement; violence; marital status; housing and caregiving.

¹ University of North Carolina Institute on Aging. *Quick Facts About Aging Around the World*. September 15, 2010. <http://www.aging.unc.edu/infocenter/data/quickfactsglobal.html#13>

² Ibid.

³ U.S. Census Bureau. *An Aging World: 2008*. June 2009, p. 1. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p95-09-1.pdf>.

⁴ United Nations Programme on Ageing. *The Ageing of the World’s Population*. (2007). www.un.org/ageing/popageing.html

Compared with men, elderly women are three times more likely to be widowed or living alone, spend more years and a larger percentage of their lifetime disabled, are nearly twice as likely to reside in a nursing home and are more likely to live in poverty.⁵ In addition, in developing countries, social and health factors such as poor education, less access to good nutrition, healthcare and social services, to property and the labor market, generally disadvantage women in comparison with men during their lifetime.⁶

At the root of all these concerns for aging women is a lifetime of gender inequity and discrimination, coupled with an ever-growing ageist attitude, especially in Western cultures. In addition, it is widely recognized that research pertaining to women over 50 years of age is non-existent in many areas of the world and that, therefore, information on this group is absent in most official documents and policy directives.⁷ This lack of research only reinforces the invisibility of this excluded population of older women.

While international landmark agreements, such as the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing are positive efforts on behalf of older women, this population still remains invisible in major development processes, such as the Millennium Development Goals.⁸ Also missing is a greater awareness of the potential and contributions of older women. In fact, as women grow older, they have much to offer, but are often considered no longer economically or reproductively useful and seen as burdens on their families.⁹

Such narrow definitions of gender roles and how women's personhood benefits societies, economies and families adversely affect women throughout all stages of their lives. Women are entitled to basic human rights, regardless of how they contribute to society or where they are in their life span. And with worldwide populations growing older, it is particularly imperative that proper recognition and basic human rights be given to women as they age.

Aging and Ageism

"So much has been said and sung of beautiful young girls, why doesn't somebody wake up to the beauty of old women?"
-- Harriet Beecher Stowe, American abolitionist and author

Most developed world countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition for "elderly" or older persons, but like many westernized concepts, this does not adapt well to other countries.¹⁰ While this definition is arbitrary, it is many times associated with the age which

⁵ LifeLedger. *Elderly Women: A Diverse and Growing Population*. June 22, 2010. https://www.elderissues.com/library/index.cfm?fuseaction=article&art_id=122&CFID=80510&CFTOKEN=29796888&x=3106300

⁶ World Health Organization. "Gender and Ageing." (2011) <http://www.who.int/ageing/gender/en/index.html>

⁷ Global Action on Aging. *Speech by Caroline Themm of the Subcommittee on Older Women of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women and Soroptimist International Representative to the United Nations*. January 13, 2003. <http://www.globalaging.org/elderrights/us/sub.htm>

⁸ HelpAge International. *Ageways. Focus on Older Women*. Issue 75. July 2010, p. 4. www.helpage.org/download/4c59803595d54

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ World Health Organization. *Definition of an older or elderly person*. (2011). www.who.int/healthinfo/survey/ageingdefnolder/en/index.html

one can begin to receive retirement or pension benefits. At the moment, there is no United Nations (U.N.) standard numerical criterion, but the U.N. agreed cutoff is 60-plus years to refer to the older population.¹¹

As to older women, the reality is that they are not a homogeneous group. They have a great diversity of experience, knowledge, ability and skills.¹² In addition, research points to a difference between “aging” and “getting old.” Aging encompasses all the biological changes that occur over a lifetime, such as increase and decrease in height, and onset and cessation of menstruation. Getting old, on the other hand, is a social concept, and feelings about it may only be slightly related to the biological processes of aging.¹³

Ageism (the stereotyping of older people and prejudice against them) and age discrimination (when someone is treated differently because of their age) continue to be tolerated across the world, although they may manifest themselves differently in different societies and cultural contexts.¹⁴ When ageism is combined with sexism, older women face a double layer of discrimination. After a lifetime of being discriminated against because they are female, they then have to cope with also being discriminated against because they are old.¹⁵ This does not mean that older men also don’t face age discrimination, however, older women are affected disproportionately.

In a youth-oriented society, both middle-aged and older women struggle with ageism and sexism.¹⁶ Because of the double standard, women are labeled “old” at an earlier age than men are.¹⁷ As one woman said, “I’m a lot more interesting than I was at 25 or 35, but it’s a lot harder to get anyone to pay attention.”¹⁸ Part of the double standard concerns women’s sexuality. At an older age, society views women as less alluring than men at older ages. Whereas older men are seen as handsome, women are often seen as less attractive.

Such a double standard for aging is, in part, due to a tendency to judge women in line with the idea that youth and sexuality are equated with beauty and reproduction, while aging goes with de-sexuality.¹⁹ Stereotypes exist worldwide about women over 50, which center on their sexuality, productivity and appearance. Globally, women report that society and popular culture believe that

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² United Nations. Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women. 47th Session. *General recommendation No. 27 on older women and protection of their human rights*. October 4-22 2010. p. 2.

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/CEDAW-C-2010-47-GC1.pdf>

¹³ Paula B. Doress-Worters and Diana Laskin Siegal, in cooperation with The Boston Women’ Health Book Collective. *The New Ourselves, Growing Older*. Touchstone. (1994) p. 4.

¹⁴ HelpAge International. *Ageways. Focus on Older Women*. Issue 75, July 2010, p. 4.

www.helpage.org/download/4c59803595d54

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Paula B. Doress-Worters and Diana Laskin Siegal, in cooperation with The Boston Women’ Health Book Collective. *The New Ourselves, Growing Older*. Touchstone. (1994) p. xxii

¹⁷ Susan Sontag. “The Double Standard of Aging,” *Saturday Review*, Vol. 95, No. 39. September 23, 1972. pp. 29-38.

¹⁸ Paula B. Doress-Worters and Diana Laskin Siegal, in cooperation with The Boston Women’ Health Book Collective. *The New Ourselves, Growing Older*. Touchstone. (1994). p. xxiii

¹⁹ United Nations Economic and Social Council. Forty-third Session Commission on the Status of Women. *Gender and ageing: problems, perceptions and policies*. March 1-12, 1999.

www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/aging.htm

women are most attractive and desirable in their 30s, although cultural variations do exist.²⁰ For countries like France, Italy and Brazil, the ideal age of beauty extends into their 40s, while in the U.S. the ideal age centers more on women in their 20s. Few countries see the age of ideal beauty as 50 or beyond.²¹

In particular, Western cultures have a strong prejudice against older women. While many traditional cultures, from Native American to Japanese, often hold their elders in high regard seeing them as storehouses of wisdom to be transmitted to the next generation, older women fare worse than their male peers because they are considered less important to the community than men.²² Despite the fact that many older women of indigenous cultures offer unique gifts as healers or wisdom keepers, they are still often relegated to a lower status in their communities.

Longevity

On average, women outlive men by six to eight years.²³ Women in the developing world typically live about 3-5 years longer than men, while in the developed world they live 5-8 years longer.²⁴ This disparity in longevity has been attributed to both genetic and socioeconomic differences between men and women.²⁵

Nowhere is the issue of longevity more salient than in modern Japan, where one of the most dramatic aging-related demographic and social shifts ever recorded have been taking place. Decreasing fertility rates, coupled with increasing life expectancy has resulted in a rapid aging of post-war Japanese society.²⁶ This appears particularly true for aging women in Japan, who are now living longer than ever before. In fact, Japanese women are now the world's longest-living, with an average life expectancy of more than 86 years.²⁷

However, women's greater longevity does not indicate a woman's healthy quality of life. In fact, women's longer life spans often mean that they are more vulnerable in a variety of areas. As with most issues affecting women, many are the impact of a lifetime of gender-based discrimination that is exacerbated in old age. One of these critical areas is poverty, with women worldwide experiencing a higher incidence than men for a variety of reasons.

Poverty and Economic Security

²⁰ Dove. *Beauty Comes of Age: Findings of the 2006 Dove global study on aging, beauty and well-being*. (September 2006), p. 11.

<http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/DoveBeautyWhitePaper.pdf>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sharon Moore Stenhouse. Baltimore Senior Issues Examiner. *Honoring elders and the aged in our society*. November 29, 2009. <http://www.examiner.com/senior-issues-in-baltimore/honoring-elders-and-the-aged-our-society>

²³ World Health Organization. *Women's health fact sheet*. (November 2009)

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs334/en/index.html>

²⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Naohiro Ogawa, Population Research Institute, Nihon University. Prepared for the United Nations Expert Group on Family Policy in a Changing World: Promoting Social Protection and Intergenerational Solidarity. *Changing Intergenerational Transfers and Rapid Population Aging in Japan*, April 14-16, 2009, p. 2. <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm09/Ogawa.pdf>

²⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

“A statement about my pension came the other day. If I work until I’m 65, I’ll get \$125 a month. My boss’s came also—he’ll get \$900 a month. He has had the resources from his high salary to contribute to that fund over the years, but I have not.”

[61-year-old woman]

-- Ourselves, Growing Older

Gender, aging and poverty are interrelated.²⁸ Poverty, however, does not affect elderly men and women equally. Economic discrimination based on gender affects women throughout their lives. As they grow older, age discrimination compounds and deepens the inequality of resources. The reality remains: Poverty for older women often reflects poor economic status earlier in life. Countries that have data on poverty by age and sex (mostly in developed countries) show that older women are more likely to be made poor than older men. But in many developing countries, there are often simply no reliable data on poverty tabulated by sex and age.²⁹

Two groups of women are most likely to be poor in the United States – women over the age of 65 who have outlived their husbands and women with dependent children.³⁰ Worldwide, the higher poverty risk for women than men living in one-person households can be partly explained by the economic status of older women, as they constitute a large segment of the population in this type of living arrangement.³¹ I think this stat needs to be verified. It’s sourced from 1994. Overall I think using sources that are more than 10 years old is not a good practice—especially if it’s a statistic that could be verified. A lifetime of lower earnings due to wage discrimination, absence from the labor market due to childbirth and jobs that are less likely to have employer-sponsored retirement plans takes its toll.³² In the United States, the statistics are sobering:

- More than 2.3 million women over the age of 65—11.5 percent—live at or below the poverty line, while slightly over 1 million—6.6 percent—of senior men live in poverty.
- Nearly one in five—19 percent of single, divorced, or widowed women over the age of 65—are poor and the risk of poverty for older women only increases as they age.
- Among married women, longer female life expectancy makes it likely that they will outlive their spouses and be left without any additional sources of income.³³

Women are made poor through no fault of their own, by actively participating in the labor market where most are concentrated in low-wage and demanding jobs, or are relegated to part-time employment with few benefits and little security. Nevertheless, during their lifetimes, women

²⁸ United Nations Economic and Social Council. Forty-third Session Commission on the Status of Women. *Gender and ageing: problems, perceptions and policies*. March 1-12, 1999.

www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/aging.htm

²⁹ U.S. Department of Health and World Health Organization. *Women, Ageing and Health*. (2008).

http://www.allcountries.org/health/women_ageing_and_health.html

³⁰ Linda A. Mooney, David Knox and Caroline Schacht, *Understanding Social Problems*, Thompson/Wadsworth (5th edition), 2007. p. 384.

³¹ United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. “The World’s Women 2010: Trends and Statistics (2010), p. 165.

http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/Worldswomen/WW_full%20report_color.pdf

³² Alexandra Cawthorne. Center for American Progress. *Elderly Poverty: The Challenge Before Us*. July 30, 2008. http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/07/elderly_poverty.html

³³ Ibid.

spend more time on combined unpaid and paid work than men do. In their life cycle, women earn less and experience inequality at work, in the family and in society.³⁴

In addition, caregiving is an important issue shaping women's employment and poverty level as they grow older. Women are more likely to exhaust their sick and vacation time, decrease their work hours, take leaves of absence, go from full-time to part-time work, resign, or have no choice but to retire early because of caregiving responsibilities for their families. As a result of these work patterns, married women's Social Security benefits continue to depend on their husband's earnings.³⁵ Consequently, non-married women are poorer from an early age, while married women who share in their husband's benefits fare somewhat better.³⁶

Furthermore, in developing nations, economic inequalities combined with political and legal structures play an important part in denying women adequate financial resources in their older years. In the developing world, for example, pension systems generally cover only a small number of women. And in some countries, such as India, inheritance laws and practices discriminate against women, further exacerbating poverty in old age. For example, under certain legal systems, daughters inherit half as much as their brothers, and mothers inherit less than their children.³⁷

Health and Health Care

"I've had to give up many favorite activities—walks on the beach, sewing, reading. Now my eyesight is so bad that I decided to give up driving and use the senior van service. I found the inner resources to enjoy life in spite of each loss so I'll cope with this one also."
[89-year-old woman who prefers to live alone]
-- *Ourselves, Growing Older*

Women's longer lives do not necessarily mean healthier lives. Many of the health problems faced by women in older age are the result of risk factors that arise in their adolescence and adulthood, such as smoking, sedentary lifestyles and unhealthy diets. In developing nations, however, poverty can be linked to inadequate access to food and nutrition and the health of older women often reflects the cumulative impact of poor diets. For example, years of child bearing and sacrificing her own nutrition can leave an older woman with chronic anemia.³⁸

In addition, other determinants in developing countries impact women's health as they age, including: lack of safe drinking water; a gender-based division of domestic chores (including the

³⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Council. Forty-third Session Commission on the Status of Women. *Gender and ageing: problems, perceptions and policies*. March 1-12, 1999. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/aging.htm>

³⁵ Alicia Munnell, Ph.D. New York Citizens' Committee on Aging. *The Economic Challenges Facing Women as They Age*. November 13, 2002. http://www.nyccoa.org/events/forums_conferences/women_and_ageing_issues_for_the_economic_challenges_fac.html

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ U.S. Department of Health and World Health Organization. *Women, Ageing and Health*. (2008). http://www.allcountries.org/health/women_ageing_and_health.html

carrying of water); environmental hazards, such as contact with polluted water; agricultural pesticides; and indoor air pollution (smoke from open fires or stoves).³⁹

Other debilitating health problems faced by older women are poor vision (including cataracts), hearing loss, arthritis, depression and dementia.⁴⁰ For women over 60 years of age in low-, middle- and high-income countries, cardiovascular disease and stroke are major killers and cause chronic health problems.⁴¹ Globally, cardiovascular disease (mainly heart attacks/ischaemic heart disease and stroke), often thought to be a “male” problem, is the main killer of older women. Women often show different symptoms from men, which contributes to under-diagnosis of heart disease in women.⁴² Women also tend to develop heart disease later in life than men. Tobacco is implicated in nearly 10 percent of cardiovascular disease in women.⁴³

Another significant cause of death and disability is chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which has been linked to more women smoking, their exposure to secondhand smoke and indoor air pollution, largely as a result of their household roles.⁴⁴ For many women, ageing is also accompanied by loss of vision. Every year, more than 2.5 million older women worldwide go blind.⁴⁵ Much of this burden of disability could be mitigated if they had access to necessary health care, which is often unavailable or too costly, especially in developing nations.

Financial challenges and poverty also impact older women in their access to healthcare. Older women in the United States are more likely than older men to depend on both Medicare and Medicaid. More than half (56 percent) of all Medicare beneficiaries are women; among the oldest old (ages 85 and older), 70 percent are women. Beneficiaries with low incomes and limited resources who qualify for Medicare and Medicaid are often referred to as “dual eligibles” and women make up 70 percent of this group.⁴⁶

In addition, controversial topics in the health care of older women include categorizing aging and menopause as “medical” or “disease” issues, when in fact, they are normal processes of a woman’s life.⁴⁷

Emotional/mental health

“I got used to always mixing with local people and having contact with local institutions. But once I got older and started

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ World Health Organization. *Women’s Health*. Fact Sheet. (November 2009).

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs334/en/index.html>

⁴¹ World Health Organization. Executive Summary. *Women and Health. Today’s Evidence, Tomorrow’s Agenda*. (2009), p. 1.

http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2009/WHO_IER_MHI_STM.09.1_eng.pdf

⁴² World Health Organization. *Women’s Health*. Fact Sheet. (November 2009).

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs334/en/index.html>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ World Health Organization. Executive Summary. *Women and Health: Today’s Evidence Tomorrow’s Agenda*. (2009), p. 3. http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2009/WHO_IER_MHI_STM.09.1_eng.pdf

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. *Women’s Health Policy Facts*. (June 2009). pp 1-2.

<http://www.kff.org/womenshealth/upload/7913.pdf>

⁴⁷ Beth H. Tracton-Bishop, Ph.D. Sociologists for Women in Society. *Women and Aging Fact Sheet*. p 3.

http://www.socwomen.org/web/images/stories/resources/fact_sheets/fact_win2006-aging.pdf

not feeling so well I had to withdraw from my activities. Now I've been left feeling very alone and uncomfortable. It really hit me hard and I got very depressed. I saw myself getting worse because I wasn't participating anymore, so I decided to form my own group, of older women like me."

[Older woman, Lima, Peru]

<http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/clust er%20Approach%20page/clusters%20pages/Gender/Gender%20Toolkit %202/1-%20Gender&Ageing%20Briefs.pdf>

Leading mental health problems of the elderly are depression, organic brain syndromes and dementia and a majority of women suffer from these conditions.⁴⁸ In fact, elderly women are more likely to suffer from depression and remain depressed for longer periods of time than men, according to a 2008 Yale study.⁴⁹ The study found that up to 20 percent of the elderly suffer from significant symptoms of depression – such as loss of appetite, sadness or sleep problems – that require treatment. Older women, however, suffer disproportionately more from depression, are more likely to become depressed and less likely to recover from depression.⁵⁰ Results from that study were unclear as to why symptoms of depression affect older women more than men.⁵¹ Some research, however, points to women experiencing depression and stress as linked to their lifelong experiences of inequality and discrimination.⁵² Across different countries and different settings, depression, anxiety, psychological distress, sexual violence and domestic violence affect women to a greater extent than men over the course of their lifetimes. Pressures created by these situations, in association with poverty, hunger, malnutrition and overwork, combine to account for older women's poor mental health.⁵³

Abuse and violence

⁴⁸ World Health Organization. *Gender and Women's Health*. (2011).

http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/genderwomen/en/

⁴⁹ Women's United Nations Report Network. *The Necessity of a Human Rights Approach and Effective United Nations Mechanism for the Human Rights of the Older Person*. January 25-29, 2010.

http://www.wunrn.com/news/2010/02_10/02_15_10/021510_ageing.htm

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Yale School of Public Health. *Older Women More Susceptible to Depression Than Older Men*. (February 2008).

<http://publichealth.yale.edu/news/news/2008/february/depression.aspx>

⁵² Qec-Eran Report. *Gender and Health in the Urban Context*. p. 3.

<http://www.qec->

[eran.org/qec/publications/Gender%20and%20Health%20in%20the%20urban%20context/gender%20and%20health%20web.doc](http://www.qec-eran.org/qec/publications/Gender%20and%20Health%20in%20the%20urban%20context/gender%20and%20health%20web.doc)

⁵³ World Health Organization. *Gender and Women's Health*. (2011).

http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/genderwomen/en/

Agnes, 85 years old, lost her husband last year. Because of her own problems with arthritis and congestive heart failure, Agnes moved in with her 55-year-old daughter, Emily. The situation is difficult for all of them. Sometimes Emily feels as if she's at the end of her rope, caring for her mother, worrying about her college-age son and about her husband, who is about to be forced into early retirement. Emily has caught herself calling her mother names and accusing her mother of ruining her life. Recently, she lost her temper and slapped her mother. In addition to feeling frightened and isolated, Agnes feels trapped and worthless.

-- American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org/pi/aging/resources/guides/elder-abuse.aspx>

The combination of ageism and sexism can result in violence and abuse for older women. Negative stereotyping and negative cultural practices often lead to physical, sexual, psychological, verbal and economic abuse. Many older women experience violence in their homes or in institutional settings, such as nursing care homes. Symptoms of abuse and neglect range from bruises, burns, other wounds, bedsores, malnutrition and infections, to social withdrawal, weight loss and dehydration.⁵⁴

Research that does exist shows that the perpetrators of violence against older women are more often family members or other close acquaintances.⁵⁵ According to data collected in the Latin American region, it is older women who are the most frequent victims of sexual abuse by family members under the influence of alcohol or drugs.⁵⁶ A study in Kenya showed that 60 percent of older women were being abused by their daughters-in-law who were preventing them from getting regular food, warm clothes, medical attention and adequate shelter.⁵⁷

These acts of violence and abuse against older women usually remain taboo and are therefore underreported out of shame and denial. Dependence on abusers for care or housing, embarrassment because the abuse was committed by a family member, friend or caregiver, and/or threats of institutionalization, may prevent women from seeking help or calling the police.⁵⁸ Denial and ignorance, especially in developing countries where cultural systems and extended family are meant to protect and care for older women, are often their greatest enemies.⁵⁹

As to domestic violence, today's older woman may have been in an abusive situation for many years and faced a number of difficulties not necessarily experienced by a younger woman. She may have grown up in an era, or with a set of beliefs, in which divorce was frowned upon. In

⁵⁴ National Center on Elder Abuse. *Why Should I Care About Elder Abuse?* (March 3, 2010). pp. 1-2.

http://www.ncea.aoa.gov/Ncearoot/Main_Site/pdf/publication/NCEA_WhatIsAbuse-2010.pdf

⁵⁵ HelpAge International. *Gender and Ageing Briefs*. (April 2002), p.10

<http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/clusters%20pages/Gender/Gender%20Toolkit%202/1-%20Gender&Ageing%20Briefs.pdf>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ HelpAge International. *Ageways. Focus on Older Women*. Issue 75, p. 5. (July 2010).

www.helpage.org/download/4c59803595d54

⁵⁸ United States Department of Justice. Office on Violence Against Women. *Abuse in Later Life Program*.

<http://www.ovv.usdoj.gov/ElderAbuse2002programbrief.htm>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

addition, she may have no independent source of income, may be isolated from family members and friends, and may be resigned to a pattern of abusive behavior that has gone on for decades.⁶⁰

Marital status/relationships/social isolation

“I think I’m still depressed. I don’t think I’ve gotten over it—after 20 years I still feel his presence. When I lost my husband I cried and cried even though I had a lot of support. People would talk to me, try to reason with me—still I just wanted to die. But then always my mind would come back to ‘I have three sons who still need me. I can’t just die.’”

[65-year-old woman]

-- Ourselves, Growing Older

Changes in marital status affect older women on many levels, especially with economic inequalities. While most cultures encourage men to remarry after losing a spouse—especially marrying a younger woman—widows experience a severe social stigma if they remarry.⁶¹ Worldwide, widows are a larger group than widowers and a greater proportion of women are widowed at older ages than men. Of the proportion of women aged 65 or more, widows constitute 75 percent in the Republic of Korea; 71 percent in Morocco; 70 percent in India; 61 percent in Japan; 59 percent in Hungary; 44 percent in Switzerland; 35 percent in Cuba; 32 percent in Haiti; and 15 percent in the United States, respectively.⁶² Overall, widowhood is increasing and most widows are more likely to be poorer.

Widows across the globe share two common experiences: a loss of social status and reduced economic circumstances. Even in developed countries, the generation of older widows, those over 60, may suffer a dramatic but subtle change in their social position.⁶³ The relative poverty of older widows marginalizes them from mainstream society and increases their vulnerability to depression, ill health and violence.⁶⁴

The experience of widowhood, however, varies according to the time of life in which it occurs.⁶⁵ If a woman has lived with a partner happily for four or five decades and perhaps raised a family together, her grief may be tempered by an awareness of the good fortune they shared together. Yet, if a woman is in her 70s or 80s and in failing health, she may have less emotional and physical energy to rebuild her life as a single woman.⁶⁶ However, widows who do not have living adult children or who live alone are considered to be particularly at risk for economic destitution,

⁶⁰ Rosalie S. Wolf. University of Massachusetts, Memorial Health Care. *Institute on Aging*. (2000).

<http://www.musc.edu/vawprevention/research/olderbattered.shtml>

⁶¹ United Nations Economic and Social Council. Forty-third Session Commission on the Status of Women. *Gender and ageing: problems, perceptions and policies*. March 1-12, 1999.

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/aging.htm>

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ United Nations Department for the Advancement of Women. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Women 2000. Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded*. (December 2001), p. 5.

http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/wom_Dec%2001%20single%20pg.pdf

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Paula B. Doress-Worters and Diana Laskin Siegal, in cooperation with The Boston Women’ Health Book Collective. *The New Ourselves, Growing Older*. Touchstone. (1994). p. 144.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

social isolation, poor health and death. As such, the support system for older men and women differ.⁶⁷

In addition, contrary to prevailing stereotypes, older women who have never married are found to be as embedded in relationships and social networks as women who were presently, or had been, married. For many older women, the world of work was an important source of friends, but in retirement, many go on to initiate new friendships with neighbors or members of organizations.⁶⁸

Caregiving

Caregiving traditionally has been a woman's role. Women have always cared for dependent members of the family and community. Societal pressures and expectations have trained generation after generation of women to put others' needs before their own.⁶⁹ All caregivers experience emotional, physical or economic stress and sometimes all three. All experience feelings of frustration and isolation. To add to these stresses, many women caregivers to their children, aging parents and other relatives are the only breadwinners in the family.⁷⁰

The typical image of caregiving and the elderly is one of an older person—usually a woman—who is ill or infirm receiving care from a younger person. In many instances, this image is true. However, older women are not only the recipients of care, but in many cases, they are the caregivers themselves.⁷¹ While both men and women provide informal caregiving, up to age 70 women are more likely to be caregivers and provide more hours of care, to provide more care over longer periods and to care for more than one person.⁷²

Caregiving exacts an exceptionally difficult toll on older women. Older women are in the workforce more than ever before, making it difficult for them to be caregivers. In addition, the geographic mobility of adult children and decreased family size has meant that older women are compelled to assume even greater caregiving responsibilities.⁷³ This is especially evident in developing countries that are experiencing a strain on informal support systems. The elderly in general have relied heavily on their family for personal care and material support. Today, however, such support is under pressure from trends that include falling fertility rates (which means fewer children as caregivers); changing cultural norms; increasing longevity of the elderly; and migration of rural young people to cities and away from elderly relatives.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Women's United Nations Report Network. *The Necessity of a Human Rights Approach and Effective United Nations Mechanism for the Human Rights of the Older Person*. January 25-29, 2010.

http://www.wunrn.com/news/2010/02_10/02_15_10/021510_ageing.htm

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Heather Boushey. *Economica: Women and the Global Economy. The New Breadwinners. An Essay from The Shriver Report: A Women's Nation Changes Everything*.

<http://www.imow.org/economica/stories/viewStory?storyId=4744>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Victoria A. Velkoff and Valerie A. Lawson. U.S. Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census. International Brief. *Gender and Aging*. (December 1998), p. 1.

<http://www.census.gov/ipc/prod/ib-9803.pdf>

⁷² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Informal Caregiving: Compassion in Action*. (June 1998). <http://aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/reports/carebro2.pdf>

⁷³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration on Aging. *Older Women*. July 16, 2009. <http://www.aoa.gov/naic/may2000/factsheets/olderwomen.html>

⁷⁴ Tohiko Kaneda. Population Reference Bureau. *A Critical Window for Policymaking on Population Aging in Developing Countries*. (January 2006).

In addition, in some countries, more and more older women are providing care to their grandchildren. This ranges from occasional babysitting to being a custodial grandparent. Various factors in the lives of their adult children, such as divorce, HIV/AIDS, drug abuse and child abuse, may have contributed to the increase in this type of caregiving, especially by older women.⁷⁵ Many grandmothers in developed countries also provide day care for grandchildren so the grandchildren's parents can work. In addition, in some developing countries, such as sub-Saharan Africa, elderly widows also have the burden of caring for grandchildren orphaned by the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Housing

Housing is an important issue for everyone and can be a critical one for older women. Beyond the need for a safe, comfortable and affordable place to live, having a sense of “home” is a vital part of her identity, security and community. While seven out of 10 older non-institutionalized persons live in a family setting, 80 percent of the more than 9 million older persons living alone are women. Many of these older women are at increased risk of becoming isolated and in need of community-based supportive services.⁷⁶ The isolation experienced by many older women is exacerbated by their relative propensity to develop chronic ailments or to become disabled. Older women are also far more likely to be fearful of crime and to respond by restricting their activities outside their homes—removing themselves even further from available resources and assistance.⁷⁷

Living arrangements of the elderly differ greatly by country and culture, and obviously, have implications for caregiving. Living with a child or grandchild is the most common type of living arrangement among older persons in Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and Africa, while in Europe and the United States, the most common arrangement is the couple-only household, followed by individuals living alone.⁷⁸ In many Western developed countries, a substantial proportion of older women live alone. Older women are much more likely to live alone than are older men, in part because of the large differences in marital status between the sexes—older women are much more likely to be widowed than are older men, as stated earlier.⁷⁹

<http://www.prb.org/Articles/2006/ACriticalWindowforPolicymakingonPopulationAginginDevelopingCountries.aspx?p=1>

⁷⁵ Victoria A. Velkoff and Valerie A. Lawson. U.S. Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census. International Brief. *Gender and Aging*. (December 1998), p. 4.

<http://www.census.gov/ipc/prod/ib-9803.pdf>

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration on Aging. *Older Women*. July 16, 2009.

<http://www.aoa.gov/naic/may2000/factsheets/olderwomen.html>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division. *Living Arrangements of Older Persons Around the World*. (2005).

<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/livingarrangement/conclusion.pdf>

⁷⁹ AgingStats.gov. Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics. (2010).

http://www.aoa.gov/agingstatsdotnet/Main_Site/Data/2010_Documents/Population.aspx

In developing countries, a strong tradition of familial ties is often expressed in co-residency of older people and their adult children. Today, a concern is, that as countries become more developed, the family's role in support will decrease. However, recent surveys in several Asian countries found that the norm is still for older people to live with their children.⁸⁰ Typically, the support is not uni-directional from adult child to older parents, but rather, there are reciprocal exchanges.⁸¹

Strengths of Older Women

There have been a number of movements in the West (the most noted being the Gray Panthers, American Association of Retired Persons, Age Concern, Help the Aged) largely since the 1960s that have sought to combat age discrimination in employment markets, the reversal of the mandatory retirement age, as well as ageist language and negative stereotypes in general. The images of positive and healthy aging people they seek to advance amount to a deconstruction of the image of old age as a necessary phase of bodily decline.⁸²

When the late Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, was introduced by then President Gerald Ford as a "young lady," she stood up and said, "Mr. President, I am not a young lady. I've lived a long time. I'm an old lady."⁸³ Age is part of a woman's identity. Therefore, to deny it is to say to the deepest parts of women, as to the world, "I am unacceptable." Denial of age slowly erodes self-esteem.⁸⁴ The Older Women's League consciously selected its name—despite objections from many who said "mature" would be more acceptable—to help women take a conscious stand on the age question, to come out of the closet on age, so to speak.⁸⁵

For many women, old age is not just about surviving, it's about flourishing. There is increasing evidence that most women feel a greater sense of fulfillment, self-actualization and reaching their peak as they grow older.⁸⁶ For example, psychologist Abigail Stewart of the University of Michigan studied women who graduated from high school or college in the 1950s and 1960 and found that as they grew older they were more certain of their identity, with comments such as "I have a sense of being my own person" or "I feel a new level of productivity or effectiveness." Other comments were that women felt more confident in their power and felt they had the authority to do what they wanted. These women talked about having "come into their own and reaching a "level of maturity, confidence and competence that was not just satisfying but

⁸⁰ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division. *Living Arrangements of Older Persons Around the World*. (2005). pp. 41-44.

<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/livingarrangement/chapter2.pdf>

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Aging and Longevity. *Ageism in America*. (November 19, 2009).

<http://aginglongevity.com/aging-news/ageism-america-ageism-discrimination-elderly-people>

⁸³ Paula B. Doress-Worters and Diana Laskin Siegal, in cooperation with The Boston Women's Health Book Collective. *The New Ourselves, Growing Older*. Touchstone. (1994). p. 428.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Susan Nolen-Hoeksema. *Psychology Today*. *Could aging be good for women?* January 12, 2010.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-power-women/201001/could-aging-be-good-women>

exhilarating.”⁸⁷ Despite many older women’s inner sense of “coming into their own,” society still has not recognized their rights on many levels.

Protection of Human Rights

Today, research recognizes the life cycle approach to the needs and intrinsic human rights of women’s lives – including childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. While these rights are often written about, discussed and are on the agendas of international and national platforms and documents, the reality is that women’s rights are, for the most part, denied. In particular, in many countries, age discrimination continues to be accepted at the individual, institutional and policy levels. Few countries have legislation prohibiting discrimination based on age.⁸⁸

Much more needs to be done to ensure that older women are afforded the basic human rights to which we are all entitled. Simultaneously, women need to be valued and recognized for their essential contributions to society in their roles as fundraisers, mentors, confidants, volunteers, historians, caregivers, grandparents and great grandparents.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee recognized that age is one of the grounds on which women suffer discrimination, and at the 42nd session, took a revolutionary approach in adopting a General Recommendation (GR) on older women and protection of their human rights.⁸⁹ The GR outlines how the articles in CEDAW apply to older women, what obligations governments have to protect, respect and fulfill those rights and will help improve the protection of older women’s rights in the 186 countries that have ratified CEDAW.⁹⁰ Governments that have ratified the convention have been asked to provide more information on older women in their reports on how they are implementing the Convention.⁹¹ The committee also stated that opportunities need to be created for older women so they can participate in the decision-making process in the fields of political, social and cultural affairs without discrimination and on the basis of equality.⁹²

In addition, the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) was endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2002.⁹³ The plan has a strong gender perspective, recognizing that women and men experience old age differently and, as such, provides a clear framework for realizing the rights of older women. A statement was adopted to the effect that “special attention

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ CEDAW Knowledge Resource. Session 47. General Recommendation Number 27. *Older Women and the Protection of Their Human Rights*. October 4-22, 2010.

<http://www.iwraw-ap.org/convention/details27.htm>

⁸⁹ Ferdous Ara Begum, Member, UN CEDAW Committee. *Ageing, Discrimination and Older Women’s Human Rights from the Perspectives of CEDAW Convention*. p. 2.

<http://www.globalaging.org/agingwatch/cedaw/cedaw.pdf>

⁹⁰ HelpAge International. *CEDAW adopts general recommendation on the rights of older women*. October 28, 2010.

<http://www.helpage.org/newsroom/latest-news/cedaw-adopts-general-recommendation-on-the-rights-of-older-women/>

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ferdous Ara Begum, Member, UN CEDAW Committee. *Ageing, Discrimination and Older Women’s Human Rights from the Perspectives of CEDAW Convention*. p. 13.

<http://www.globalaging.org/agingwatch/cedaw/cedaw.pdf>

⁹³ HelpAge International. *NGO Thematic Shadow Report on Older Women’s Rights in Bolivia*. Submitted to the 40th session on the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (November 2007), p. 5. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/HelpAgebolivia.pdf>

be focused on the special needs of older women” with the recommendation that the physical, financial and emotional needs of older women should be addressed and women’s access to health care be improved.⁹⁴ For example, in Ghana many people, like many Africans, genuinely fear witches – old women who they believe are capable of causing calamities and misfortunes, from infertility to drought and death. These elderly women are often abandoned and stigmatized and live in “witches camps.” As one of the country participants of the Madrid Plan, Ghana initiated a program to support these women with money, food, clothing, as well as micro-finance schemes to help them survive.⁹⁵

Furthermore, in 2007, the World Health Organization (WHO) published “Women, Aging and Health: A Framework for Action” in which they identified non-governmental organizations as having a “key role in advocating and enabling policy and practice changes” for older women.⁹⁶ According to WHO, these policy and practice changes must be made “in order to reduce the inequities women experience based on race, class and geography and to improve older women’s access to a continuum of quality of care that is both age, and gender responsive.”⁹⁷ The report also indicates that NGOs must also help older women to build the knowledge and skills necessary to act on their own interests. A central theme of the document was the importance of engaging elder women with the skills and tools needed to participate in policy creation as advocates, lobbyists or legislative leaders.

As such, community building was recognized as a key area identified as critical for elderly women. On a small scale, this would involve developing conversations among groups of older women, including those more isolated. Aging women identified friendship, social interaction and networking as crucial. The resulting exchange of views and ideas would help ensure that elder women define their own needs, determine how best to meet their needs and empower them to organize to press for policies and programs that are responsive to local concerns and cultural norms.⁹⁸ Older women themselves hold the key to addressing many of the grim realities facing our aging population today.

Conclusion

Despite the information available today regarding the needs of current and future aging women, societies and countries still do not have the necessary tools in place to provide them a healthy quality of life on many levels. As

⁹⁴ Ferdous Ara Begum, Member, UN CEDAW Committee. *Ageing, Discrimination and Older Women’s Human Rights from the Perspectives of CEDAW Convention*. p. 3.

<http://www.globalaging.org/agingwatch/cedaw/cedaw.pdf>

⁹⁵ Ghana Country Report on the Implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. (August 2007), p. 12. http://www.pfcmc.com/ageing/documents/review_map/GHANA.pdf

⁹⁶ World Health Organization. *Women, Ageing and Health: A Framework for Action*. (2007). p. 44. http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2007/women_ageing.pdf

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 45.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

such, efforts must be made in investing in improving older women's health and social status in all countries, especially in the least developed nations.

Societies must empower women of all ages (young and old) in all areas of life, and governments must place their needs as one of their highest policy, program and funding priorities.

In addition, elimination of all forms of discrimination against older women can only be achieved by fully respecting and protecting their dignity, right to integrity and self-determination.

As these efforts go forward, it is also important to note that as women age, they are acutely aware of a new standing in the world. In developed nations, they are more confident, more financially independent, healthier, more involved in society, more outspoken and more socially engaged than when they were younger.⁹⁹ Older women in developing nations, however, because of poverty and patriarchal societies, still struggle to take their rightful places in society, and while their contributions remain significant, many of them have remained invisible to the policy makers of both developed and developing nations.¹⁰⁰ Again, it must be noted that while their contributions are significant, women at all ages are entitled to their basic human rights, no matter their contributions to society or the world.

Ultimately, the present road to aging, especially for women, is a rocky one. But the old, and soon-to-be-old, can change that in this lifetime. It is up to men and women, working together, to develop new ways of providing mutual help in communities and working together to assure that public policies do not neglect the needs of the aged, especially women. The world must reject the demeaning images of older women and the exclusion of older women from policymaking. And finally, women themselves must proudly claim their age and experience and define their rights to lead lives of dignity, activity and involvement in communities.¹⁰¹ This includes decent health care and housing; and income sufficient to enjoy, rather than simply to endure

⁹⁹ Dove. *Beauty Comes of Age: Findings of the 2006 Dove global study on aging, beauty and well-being*. September 2006. p. 11.

<http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/DoveBeautyWhitePaper.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ United Nations Economic and Social Council. Forty-third Session Commission on the Status of Women. *Gender and ageing: problems, perceptions and policies*. March 1-12, 1999.

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/aging.htm>

¹⁰¹ Paula B. Doress-Worters and Diana Laskin Siegal, in cooperation with The Boston Women's Health Book Collective. *The New Ourselves, Growing Older*. Touchstone. (1994) p. 439.

later years; and the recognition that older women are important and valued members, in and of themselves, of society.¹⁰²

Soroptimist Programs

Soroptimist is an international volunteer organization for business and professional women who work to improve the lives of women and girls, in local communities and throughout the world. Clubs undertake a number of different projects to confront economic and social realities facing women, both locally and throughout the world. Projects help women on a variety of fronts that impact their working lives, including: providing education and job-skills training, which leads to better employment opportunities; confronting domestic violence in the workplace; and helping women in the wake of natural and man-made disasters. As an organization, Soroptimist supports the following programs:

Soroptimist Women’s Opportunity Awards—The Women’s Opportunity Awards improves the lives of women by giving them the resources they need to upgrade their education, skills and employment prospects. Each year, Soroptimist clubs in 19 countries and territories assist women in overcoming personal difficulties and improving their lives through education and skills training. The women, who provide the primary source of financial support for their families, may use the cash award to offset any costs associated with their efforts to attain higher education, including books, childcare and transportation. Club recipients become eligible for additional cash awards at other levels of the organization, including three \$10,000 finalist awards.

Many Women’s Opportunity Award recipients have overcome enormous obstacles in their quest for a better life, including poverty, domestic violence and substance abuse. Each year, more than \$1.5 million is disbursed through awards at various levels of the organization to help women achieve their dreams of a better life for themselves and their families. Since the Women’s Opportunity Awards program began in 1972, it is estimated that \$25 million has been disbursed and more than 30,000 women have been assisted.

¹⁰² Ibid.