

West Expert Meeting on the Rights of Older Women

“Human rights of older women in West Africa: The need for enhanced protection”

Thursday, 9 August 2018

University of Ghana, Legon
Ghana



1. Summary

The West Africa Expert Meeting on the Rights of Older Women, organised by the Centre for Human Rights in partnership with HelpAge International and Moremi Initiative for Women's Leadership in Africa, took place at the University of Ghana, Legon on 9 August 2018. This event was held in the wake of the 27th African Human Rights Moot Court Competition, held annually by the Centre, and formed part of the Centre's year-long [#AgeWithRights](#) campaign to advocate for the protection of the rights of older women in Africa.

The meeting brought together experts from West African countries, including Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Guinea, Gambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The meeting focused on the collective deliberation of issues that affect older women in the region and had the objective of coming up with strategies to push respective states to take action to address the specific vulnerabilities of older women. Participating experts included representatives from government ministries, civil society organisations, human rights advocates and researchers with experience working on the rights of older persons. One specific issue highlighted throughout the meeting was the urgent need for the [ratification of the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Older Persons](#), which although adopted by African Union member states in 2016, has suffered neglect as no states have ratified the Protocol as yet.

The meeting had three objectives:

- (i) to identify and examine emerging issues regarding protection and promotion of the rights of older women, including measures to prevent discrimination, neglect, abuse and violence;
- (ii) to evaluate national and international approaches to widening and deepening the rights of older persons and;
- (iii) to elaborate on how to promote the rights of older persons, with a specific focus on the popularisation and ratification of the Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons.

The meeting also discussed specific issues and obligations that were critical to the enjoyment of all rights by older persons with a key focus on older women, such as discrimination; the right to health; the right to work and the right to social security.

The Director of the Centre for Human Rights, Prof. Frans Viljoen underscored in his opening address the importance of addressing the rights of older persons, especially older women. He also made a call for action for states to ratify the Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons.

2. Summary of proceedings

Session 1: Population Ageing and its Gender Dimensions

Delali Badasu, Regional Institute for Population Studies Legon & Former Director, Centre for Migration Studies

Dr Badasu's presentation examined "The Elderly in Ghana: Gendered Socio-demographic Characteristics" and focused on the demographics of older persons in Ghana based on the 2010 census. The growth of the population of the elderly in Ghana has been rapid, especially over the past two decades for older persons. 6.7 % of the population of Ghana is 60 years and above. The population of older people will continue to grow rapidly into the future despite the youthful nature of the total national population as a result of reduction in fertility rates and increased life expectancy. By 2050, 50 % of the population will be 60 years and above. More older women live in the urban areas than men. The older women population also constitute a higher proportion of those widowed (49.1%) who might need some special assistance.

The categorization of the "old-old" (75+ years) are predominantly females. The 'feminization' of Ghana's aged population has been gradually taking place. Older women are less educated; this has implications for their access to post-retirement benefit and wellbeing. A large proportion of older persons are in need of basic amenities such as toilet facilities, with 28 % of those persons over 85 years not having access to toilet facilities. In addition, there is a high prevalence of disability amongst older persons which increases with age; and women are at higher risk of disability in advanced ages.

Thus, it is vital that a life cycle approach is used to tackle ageing problems from the day a person is born – invest in the youth population (education, healthcare, economic opportunity). Dr. Badasu ended by emphasizing that there is not a singular policy that fits the needs of all older persons, as there are different categorisations of older persons which require paying attention to the specific needs of each group: "young-old" 60-73` years; "old-old" 75-84 years; "very old" 85+ years.

Chris Dadzie, Former Department Commissioner, Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice; former FIDA Director, Lawyer and former Army Officer

Chris Dadzie provided an overview of the lived experience of ageing. She commenced her presentation stating that the experience of ageing / "getting old" starts when you are conceived. There are societal expectations when one grows old: what to wear and the image you should portray. The stereotypical image of older women as excluded, or disabled, doesn't fit how she sees herself. She acknowledged the enhanced burden that older women in particular face as they age, because they are expected to assume more caretaking and childcare roles as they age. This care work of taking care of grandchildren is unpaid. There is also the possibility of children prioritising the care of fathers/grandfathers over that of mothers/grandmothers. This is coupled with the apprehension of burdening children with ageing issues, as well as society's pressure on older people to disengage from society, and to stay still/quiet.

Chris emphasised the need to make sure older people are allowed to *decide for themselves*, and to not make assumptions about what they need, or how they *should* engage in society. “Don’t shut us out”, she concluded.

Dr Florence Akosua Agyemang, Centre for Ageing Studies, University of Ghana, Legon

Dr. Agyemang’s presentation focused on “Ageing and its gender dimensions.” According to the Ghana Statistical Service, 2013, 54% of the elderly population reside in rural areas, while 43% of the elderly population reside in the rural parts of Greater Accra, Eastern and Ashanti Regions. Some of the benefits of ageing include being the custodians of welfare of family, serving as mediators and source of history and treated with respect. However, older persons in Ghana face various challenges at individual, government and societal levels.

Government policies

There is no specific law on ageing as the ageing bill has yet to pass since 2010, coupled with inadequate resources. In addition, retirement age at 60 is considered low and this is detrimental to the mental and financial well-being of older persons. The informal workers are often neglected with poorly structured pension schemes.

Societal level

There is a gradual shift in cultural trends due to urbanization and the breakdown of extended family system. Additionally, there is increased religiosity and spirituality which is a fertile breeding ground for stereotypes about older persons. Ageism, witchcraft accusations (women as witches; men become chiefs) and widowhood (when husband passes, the woman is blamed) are evident.

Gender dimensions: Feminization of Ageing

On average, women live longer than men. This “feminization” of ageing leaves many women alone in old age or with the responsibility of caring for their older/sicker partners, which creates challenges as their health declines. Today’s older women were mostly engaged in domestic work when they were younger and perform traditional roles as caregivers and nurturers as they aged.

There have also been incidences of older women being branded as witches in Ghana. It is estimated that over 1,000 older women are branded as witches and kept in witch camps in parts of Ghana –e.g. Gambaga Witch Camp (Igwe, 2011).

Way Forward:

- Pass an ageing bill, encourage family support systems, active retirement planning based on public discourse, healthy ageing (access to facilities)
- Structured pension schemes (“pension for all”)
- Increase health benefits
- Reconsider retirement at 60

There is also a need to encourage family support systems, active retirement planning, public discourse and dialogue and social engagement.

Conclusion

During the interactive session following the presentations, questions were raised around how ascribed gender roles impact ageing? – when roles are swapped, how does ageing differ? Dadzie responded by stating that women are labelled as naturally engaged in nurturing and childrearing. For example, men as chefs are paid, while women as cooks are not. She reiterated the need to really understand how communities work, and think about how we perpetuate these roles, and what impact they have.

Regarding whether the witch camps in Ghana were established by government, the presenters responded that the camps started as villages, but older women were sent there by their families especially when someone dies in the family and she gets blamed. There is need for actual action to help older women and to disrupt harmful stereotypes that portray them as witches and lead to their punishment in their communities.

Session 2: Value and Importance of the Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons

Lefhoko Kesamang, Senior Social Welfare Officer, Social Affairs Department, African Union

Lefhoko Kesamang provided a background on the Protocol on Older Persons, which was prepared by the Working Group on Older Persons in Africa (Working Group) of the African Commission. The Working Group undertook consultations with stakeholders from across Africa through face-to-face meetings as well as soliciting for feedback on early drafts of the Protocol posted on the Commission's website. The Protocol draws from key international and regional human rights instruments. The Protocol provides the first comprehensive African normative basis for ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities as full human beings with inherent dignity and not as mere objects. However, unlike the Disability Protocol, there is no significant civil society movement with which to collaboratively engage in dialogue and advocate for the ratification of the Protocol.

He concluded with an appeal to everyone to facilitate, lobby and advocate for our Member States to sign and ratify the Protocol on the Rights Older Persons.

Roseline Kihumba, International & Regional Policies Coordinator, HelpAge International

On the importance of ratifying the Protocol, Roseline highlighted that the Protocol establishes norms and standards to use at a national level that relates to legal policy and programmatic provisions, and to the establishment of the right institutions to actualise rights. She also discussed the need to improve accountability and put older persons at the same level of importance as other groups.

She also highlighted the importance of ratification and domestication of the Protocol, which includes the following:

- An opportunity to systematically integrate rights of older persons in development, and to coordinate how we undertake these issues;
- Provides an approach to fulfilling the SDG emphasis on universality and integration of older persons in development arena; and

- Helps us to locate the rights of older persons alongside and within the human rights framework.

Deacon Ben Gbenda, Salone Organisation for the Welfare of the Aged, Sierra Leone

Deacon Gbenda gave an overview of the challenges for elderly people within the Sierra Leonean context and the need to ratify the Protocol. Giving a contextual background, Deacon Gbenda noted that the country has endured devastating disasters which compounded the challenges for older persons; the decade-old rebel war (March 1992-2002), the Ebola Virus outbreak (2016) and the recent mud slide and flash flood in the Capital Freetown, which culminated into the death of many people, leaving several older persons without shelter, food and medicines.

Additionally, the economic down-turn has made it difficult for younger people to spend time and money providing care for older persons. In the absence of formal or official support systems older folks, mainly older women have been left with little to no support.

Challenges older persons in Sierra Leone face include:

- Ebola virus impact on older persons (food, shelter, healthcare access)
- Impact of economic downturn
- Absence of a legal framework that supports advocacy activities
- Pension is for the very few who have pensionable employment

This illustrates the need to ratify the Protocol in order to ensure the promotion of the rights of older persons and ratification will afford human rights campaigners leverage to hold state actors/non-state actors.

Dr. Esi Ansah, Founder, Association of Ghana's Elders, Ghana

Dr. Esi Ansah noted that AGE, which was established in December 2013, is a unique organisation founded with the aim of addressing the concerns of senior citizens, advancing and promoting their interests through advocacy and developing diverse innovations. In engaging and empowering older persons, some big challenges the organisation faces include transportation, which was identified as a key issue affecting older persons (alongside health access, financial stability, housing and loneliness). Additionally, the lack of data on older persons – which affects how countries look at ratifying the Protocol: “hard to tell the story when you’re not given any evidence”. The needs of urban older persons are more acute than rural persons – community is not so close, and they need transport and access to family.

Dr. Ansah, reiterated the need to do more than simply pay lip service regarding respect for older persons – respect does not necessarily translate into institutions. As intergenerational learning is missing, older persons need to be asked about “what is it that they always wanted to do” and then connect them with people doing that – and they teach each other.”

Conversation: Obstacles to Ratifying the Protocol

***With Sarah Kargbo, Assistant Director, Gender Policy, Gender Directorate, Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, Sierra Leone and Momodu K. Metzger, Consultant, Human Rights Protection Division, Ministry of Justice, Liberia**

This session focused on inputs from Sierra Leone and Liberia on the internal processes and advocacy strategies for advancing awareness on the Protocol. The panellists discussed the national protections for the rights of older persons in their respective states, with an emphasis on how national and local mechanisms designed to promote social services do not necessarily capture the particular needs of different women.

Finally, Metzger and Kargbo reflected on the level of awareness of the existence of the Protocol across ministries, and throughout civil society and the society more broadly. They noted that awareness of the Protocol is rather nonexistent. Both panelists emphasized the need to strengthen civil society in the area of older persons rights, and to locate these rights within existing women's rights and disability rights initiatives and movements.

Session 3: Country Case Studies: Progress and Challenges in Strengthening the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Women

** This panel comprised speakers from Nigeria, The Gambia, Guinée-Conakry, DRC and Liberia.*

Kazanka Comfort Dada, Fantsuam Foundation (Nigeria)

Within the Nigerian context, the impact of HIV and AIDS resulted in a movement of orphans back to the villages to be catered for, by their grandmothers. There were no social services to help grandmothers and the traditional safety net of the extended family support had weakened considerably. As a result, *Fantsuam Foundation* instituted new program called KAKAS (literal translation = grandmother) to meet the psycho-social, financial, health and housing needs of the grandmother and her new dependents. Other challenges include elder abuse – especially accusations of witchcraft, Ageism – discrimination/ disrespect on old age.

Dr. Bully Camara, Ageing with a Smile Initiative (The Gambia)

According to the 2013 census, 4.8 % of the population in The Gambia is 60 years and above, with 51.1 % being older women. Issues impacting older women include abuse; psycho-social issues resulting from isolation, health problems, economic issues and burden of responsibility. A key challenge in The Gambia is inadequate awareness and advocacy. However, there is a need for more access to healthcare; to promote intergenerational dialogue and solidarity; to advocate for older persons' rights; and to promote real integration of older persons into Gambian society.

Mamadi Condé, Family Development Division, Department of Social Action of the Ministry of Social Action, Child and Women Empowerment (Guinée-Conakry)

Even though national censuses have been organized in 1983, 1996 and 2014, the Republic of Guinea is yet to determine the precise number of older women in the country and allocate appropriate measures to address their plights. What is generally known is that Guinea has 603 706 aged persons (5.7% of the entire population), the bulk of which live in rural areas. The latter do not effectively benefit from the policy that are being implemented by the government. Issues they are currently facing include the lack of health institutions specialised in the treatment of older women diseases including breast and uterine cancer, and the absence of family support. This demonstrates clearly how policies of successive governments have been ineffective to address the plight of older women and that there is a need to adopt measures that are consistent with the rights of older persons and particularly older women. He concluded with an emphasis on the need to include the needs of older persons in various governmental policies.

Debaba Lufira Wafulandi Patient, Club des Amis du Droit (DRC)

Patient highlighted that there are inadequate laws that addresses the particular needs of older persons especially for older women. For instance, regarding witchcraft, there is a lack of regulations to address those people that bring witchcraft accusations. With data from two provinces in 2015, approximately 55 women lost their lives because of witchcraft accusations, and they were burned alive. Only 2 people have faced the law for assaulting older women accused of witchcraft. Other issues include access to justice as it is expensive and is quite a long process, as well as a lack of pensions for older women. Older women continue to form the majority of street beggars.

He further highlighted that civil society organisations are working to lobby government to put measures in place to ensure the rights and protection of older persons, especially, older women. Thus, there is a need to establish complaint mechanisms to enable older women to report threats and abuse.

Momodu Metzger, Human Rights Protection Division, Ministry of Justice (Liberia)

Mr. Metzger explored the impact of Ebola on older women in Liberia. Ebola caused widespread collapse of the healthcare system in Liberia beginning in 2014. This meant that communities were left to take care of the ill. Older women had the responsibility of taking care of their children, grandchildren, neighbours, husbands, etc.

Additionally, witchcraft accusations were also evident during this time, which resulted in older women being taken away to camps and thus not having access and assistance to rescue efforts. Initial treatment of older people suffering from Ebola was akin to torture and inhumane treatment. Generally, the discrimination, stereotyping and stigmatization of older women was amplified by the Ebola crisis.

Conclusion

The presentations were followed by questions and answer session which focused on the need to improve the economic situation of older women through cash transfers.

Session 4: Action Planning and Way Forward

Discussion throughout the day resulted in the following recommendations:

- Create national action groups/NGO coalitions to put pressure on national governments to ratify the Protocol.
- Develop and foster opportunities to raise awareness within local and national organisations and mobilize older persons.
- Develop and gather data - evidence - by strengthening institutions and academic institutions to generate data; there is a need to develop evidence to push for the ratification of the Protocol
- Build partnerships across government, civil society organisations and the private sector to develop multisectoral approaches that address the problems faced by older persons.
- Work together to provide technical support and work closely with national women's/human rights institutions.
- Mobilise stakeholders and engage with all supranational entities – ECOWAS, AU, etc.
- Policy implementation should also target specific subgroups of older persons based on different priority areas including:
 - Housing
 - Improved sanitation
 - Sustaining and improving economic activity rate of the aged, especially elderly women in urban areas
 - Involving the media to promote the cultural practices that protect the elderly from discrimination and stigma
- All policy initiatives should include investing in the youth and adults of today to ensure a secure old age.
- Ensure culturally appropriate interventions