



CSW69/Beijing+30

Putting older women at the heart of the vision for gender equality

Key messages

- The implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action since 1995 has not adequately met the rights and needs of older women. Much more must be done by the UK Government, and its partners, to recognise and support older women as equal rights holders invested in the futures of their communities and economies.
- Gendered ageism is pervasive and endemic, creating barriers for older women to access their rights and build resilience across many of the 12 Areas of Critical Concern highlighted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
- Older women are missing from narratives on gender equality and women's rights from local to global level, rendering their valuable experiences and contributions invisible.
- Donors are failing to provide support to older women, with only 0.1 per cent of aid funding with gender equality as a primary objective being inclusive of older women.
- Gender equality can only be achieved if a rights-based, life course and multigenerational approach is embedded in government, institutional and civil society thinking – leaving no woman or girl behind.
- Commitments from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to work with women's rights organisations are not explicit about the participation of older women.

This paper highlights the Beijing Platform for Action's commitments in relation to older women, identifying gaps and where relevant, progress made against some of the Critical Areas of Concern. It also makes recommendations for how civil society organisations, United Nations (UN) agencies and donor governments, specifically the UK Government, can promote a more effective and

explicit focus on older women's rights and can make space for older women's voices to be heard.

The global population is ageing at an unprecedented pace, with women making up over half of the older population. By 2050, 55 per cent of the world's 2 billion older people will be female¹, the vast majority living in low

and middle-income countries. Older women are equal members of society and active agents of change, but they are being failed by governments, UN agencies, civil society and their own communities.

The increasingly challenging contexts of the climate emergency, the cost-of-living crisis, and global conflicts are creating additional risks and barriers for women's participation in society and access to support and resources, particularly in older age.

Since Beijing +25, the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has committed to taking a life course approach in its Women and Girls Strategy and its Disability Inclusion and Rights Strategy. UN Commission on the Status of Women agreed language has also highlighted the need for full, meaningful and equal participation in decision

making and public life for older women. However, the UK Government's work with women's rights organisations globally has not yet targeted older women explicitly within these efforts.

We are keen to see commitments to the rights of older women championed at the 69th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) and beyond, to ensure that the implementation of CSW69 outcomes and continued implementation of the Beijing Declaration include older women. CSW and Beijing +30 provide a platform for the UK Government to promote a progressive approach to women's rights. They help the UK Government to make clear its commitment to older women within its diplomatic engagement and interventions, as well as in the implementation of its domestic and international work with women and girls.



“The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognised the importance of older women’s rights and raised hopes of progress for women of all ages. We live in an ageing world, and 30 years on, the number of older women has increased significantly, but realisation of their rights has not. Older women face multiple and serious injustices. Given its mission of equality for all, I call on the UK Government to champion and implement the inclusion of older women.”

- Alison Marshall, Age International CEO

“At the current rate, the World Economic Forum estimates it will take 134 years to achieve gender parity - far beyond my lifetime, when I had once hoped to see it. One of the most glaring gaps in the fight for gender equality is the lack of attention given to older women.”

- Ann Keeling, Age International Chair



Beijing +30: An opportunity to progress older women's rights

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the major women's rights framework agreed by UN member states in 1995, recognised age discrimination as a barrier to women's empowerment and advancement globally.

It recognised older women, their rights and needs in relation to poverty, healthcare, violence, barriers to the labour market, discrimination at work and as a civilian group particularly affected by armed conflict. Although its language could have been stronger, and key areas such as care infrastructure were overlooked, the original Declaration put down a marker for older women's inclusion in thinking on women's rights; the increasing proportion of older women in the population is referenced, as is the need for better data disaggregated by age and sex.

Despite this, 30 years on, progress has been slow for older women. The promises of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action have largely not been realised, and the voices and valuable experiences of older women from poorer contexts are seldom heard by their communities or in global fora. Endemic gendered ageism, combined with ableism, creates serious obstacles for older women to

contribute to society as they wish and to receive the support they need. Beyond reproductive age, women are too often invisible in data, policy and programmes – including initiatives focused on furthering all women's access to rights. Recent research found that only 0.1% of all aid funding that is primarily targeted at achieving gender equality includes older women².

Older women face specific barriers to accessing their rights. Their exclusion holds back progress; gender equality can only be achieved if a multigenerational approach is taken, recognising the rights, multiple roles and diverse realities of women across the whole life course, including in older age.

The UK Government has championed the use of much needed language on the life course and age in previous meetings of CSW, and has made older women a part of its agenda for this year's CSW69. It is encouraging that social protection, which is vital for the resilience of older women and their households, has been made a critical part of its international work. But much more needs to be done to explicitly include older women.

Below are six issues we hope to see the UK prioritise, with other governments, and with its civil society partners. We are keen to see the UK government lead the way on listening to, and building support for, older women throughout the next phase of the Beijing Platform's implementation.

1: Older women and poverty

Women are at greater risk of poverty in older age due to a lifetime of accumulated inequalities and discrimination, disproportionate care responsibilities and gendered work patterns, which affect their right to access income security. They are less likely to be able to rely on savings and assets than older men, and less likely to access pensions.

- There is a gender pension gap in every region of the world. Only 8.1 per cent of 'working age' women in low and middle-income countries are currently covered by a pension, compared to 20.8 per cent of men.³ In Ethiopia, only 1.5 per cent of older women receive pension benefits, compared to 12.9 per cent of men.⁴
- Old age poverty is rife, particularly for women – including in the UK where women are more likely to live in poverty in their older age.⁵



Bokayo, 75, in Kenya is the sole breadwinner for her family after her husband - who had gone in search of pasture for their livestock - was killed in a bandit attack. She is now living through a severe drought.

“In our community, if livestock fails to provide, as a woman there would be no other source of income. We become desperate with no alternative. Around the time I was married, we experienced a drought but nothing like this.”

- Globally, women are more likely than men to fall into extreme poverty in older age.
- Widows are particularly at risk of poverty – and globally older women are more likely to be widowed and to live alone, key factors in worsening economic security.⁶
- In the UK, older single women are particularly at risk of poverty. 23% of single women live in poverty, in comparison to 13% of those in couples.⁷

2: Older women and health

Although women live longer, they live a larger proportion of their later life in poor health or with one or more disabilities. Women in later life maintain the right to the highest standard of physical and mental health regardless of ageist assumptions and notions – but data gaps mean that their needs and experiences are not properly captured.

- Older women have specific health needs but often face discrimination on the basis of their age, impeding their access to basic health services and specialist services such as sexual and reproductive healthcare.
- The UK has the largest female health gap in the G20 and the 12th largest globally, with women spending three more years in ill health and disability compared to men.⁸
- Older people face the greatest risk from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and co-morbidity, but are often excluded from official statistics at local, national and global levels. A lack of age, sex and disability disaggregated data makes it impossible to capture older women’s specific experiences and needs.⁹
- However, we know that women are susceptible to different NCDs than men, such as heart disease, stroke, cervical and breast cancer, and can present with different symptoms. Older women also face complications relating to previous pregnancies and childbirth, menopause and post-menopause.

0.1%

of total aid spending on gender equality includes older women

- Power imbalances and gender inequalities experienced by women and girls across their life course have a profound impact on their health and wellbeing at all ages, and can lead to accumulated and compounded disadvantage in later life.
- When older women’s health is supported, they can maintain their functional ability and independence, and are able to continue contributing to their families, communities and economies in the ways that they wish to.

Why we need disaggregated data

Disaggregated data and support for national statistics offices was recognised in the Beijing Platform for Action as a gap and a priority across many areas. However, data is still vastly inadequate for measuring and monitoring the situation of women and girls in relation to many of the Critical Areas of Concern. This has a particular impact on those groups experiencing intersecting and multiple discrimination such as older women, widows and women with disabilities.

- The lack of age-disaggregated data in the UK and globally means that older people have rarely been considered as victims or survivors of domestic abuse by policy makers, service providers or health and care workers. This means there is a significant lack of policies on, or support available to, older women.
- Demographic and Health Surveys only collect data on women up to age 49, and elder abuse data is scarce in low and middle-income countries. For instance, a WHO report on sexual violence and intimate partner violence (IPV) found data on older women in only 66 of 392 studies.¹⁰
- Where older age groups are referenced, data is often presented with an aggregate figure that does not distinguish between different age groups. This obscures the diversity of the experience of ageing – the experiences of a 60 year-old and an 80 year-old could be very different in any given context.
- Medical research has historically been focused on male biology and symptoms – rendering women’s experiences invisible and overlooking women’s experiences, pain and appropriate dosage of medicines.
- The specific roles and contributions of older people have not been explicitly explored in most research, for example on unpaid care work, and are excluded from much labour force data, leading to assumptions that older people are recipients of care and are ‘economically inactive’ when older women and men’s realities are as diverse and nuanced as any age group.

3: Violence against older women

Violence has no age limit. Older people, and particularly older women, are at risk of violence but their experiences are vastly under-reported globally, and standard data systems and surveys exclude women over 49, hiding the extent of the issue.

- Globally, data on violence against older women remains severely lacking, with Demographic Health Surveys stopping at age 49. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognised the limitations of data on violence against older women and makes

recommendations for improving it.¹¹

- The UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons said in her 2023 report that sexual violence in older age is the least reported and documented form of abuse of older persons.¹²
- There is a risk that older women experiencing violence fall through the cracks between

elder abuse health and protection responses, and between elder abuse and gender-based violence support.

- Older women with disabilities, from minoritised ethnic communities, or those who identify as LGBTQ+ are likely to face further issues in relation to reporting domestic abuse and accessing appropriate support.

4: Older women and the economy

Older women have significant roles in their economies which are not recognised or supported; carrying out crucial unpaid and paid work for their families and communities, and propping up younger generations of women and girls. Globally, older women are particularly likely to work in the informal economy, lacking the protections and security that come with formal employment. During humanitarian crises, social support structures that older women rely on are disrupted, leaving them and their dependents particularly at risk.

- Age International and the Overseas Development Institute research found that older women globally do around 4.3 hours of unpaid care work on average a day.¹³
- In the UK, 16% of women aged 55-64 have a caring responsibility. Women also provide care more intensively than men, with 7% of women providing more than 35 hours a week of care – with impacts on their paid employment and on mental health.¹⁴
- Women from minoritised ethnic communities provide some of the most intensive levels of care in the UK, and are more likely to have financial difficulties, suffer from impacts on their wellbeing, and may find it more difficult to seek advice, support or benefits.¹⁵
- The FCDO supported Gender-Responsive Age-Sensitive Social Protection (GRASSP) research programme, led by UNICEF Innocenti, took an explicitly gender and age-responsive focus – but this was weighted towards younger women and girls. Much more needs to be done to analyse the specific experiences of older women.
- Digital inclusion is key to older women’s economic empowerment. The digitalisation of social protection payments risks older women and people with disabilities not being able to access them, thereby undermining their rights, and increasing their risk of financial abuse.¹⁶

Daw Hnin Ku, 75, from Myanmar, receives financial support through our partner HelpAge Myanmar’s older persons group.

“I can’t work anymore. I felt I was getting too old and someone had to take care of the grandchildren, so I did that. If I am too unwell to take care of them, then my daughter has to stop working.”



5: Older women in armed conflict and other crises

Older people, particularly older women, are often overlooked in humanitarian responses and left behind in times of conflict, leading to serious violations of their rights. In some contexts, older people may have been exposed to multiple situations of conflict through their lifetimes.

- Conflict weakens older people's ability to manage during a crisis.¹⁷
- Older people, particularly older women, tend to skip meals in crisis contexts so younger members of their household can eat.¹⁸ One study on the cost-of-living crisis in Ethiopia, Malawi and Tanzania found that older women, who already face challenges accessing food and nutrition, experienced more severe impacts on their diet.¹⁹
- In Ukraine, women make up two-thirds of the population over the age of 65.²⁰ The war in Ukraine has caused 10.4 million people to leave their homes, with 14% of older women being internally displaced compared to 5% of older men.²¹
- In Gaza, 90% of the population has been displaced by the conflict.²² Displacement shelters are not equipped to support older Palestinians who require specific care, particularly older women. Women of all ages living in the shelters are facing an increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse.



Dave Gilt / Age International

6: Older women and the environment

The climate emergency has escalated significantly since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action. Older women, particularly those in poorer contexts and with disabilities, are among the most affected by the climate crisis. But they are rarely recognised, or actively included, as participants or leaders in climate action. Climate change is compounding and exacerbating the issues that older women already face, and the impacts of other crises, making it even more critical to take measures to support their resilience.

- Older people have experience and skills which should be harnessed in the response to climate change, but which are often overlooked. A recent HelpAge International pilot of intergenerational approaches to supporting locally-led climate responses showed how these approaches could strengthen social capital and communities' capacity to adapt.²³
- Climate change can make it even more difficult for older people to access basic services²⁴. Older women already face additional barriers to accessing their rights, and to contributing to the plans and decisions which affect them.²⁵
- Women of all ages carry out the bulk of unpaid care work in their households and communities, and in older age they are often the guardians of indigenous knowledge and of the land. Their experiences are valuable assets to the climate change response, but currently older people are often not considered relevant to the conversation.

Recommendations

Despite some acknowledgement the challenges facing older women - and their economic roles - in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, older women's voices, needs and rights are still not visible in decision-making spaces on gender equality. The UK Government and its partners have a role in addressing this invisibility and in ensuring CSW69 reflects a step change in older women's inclusion.

Beijing +30 is an opportunity to articulate a new global agenda where older women's concerns are heard, their crucial roles supported, and their equal rights embedded. The resetting of UK Government priorities and plans provides a chance to embed this approach in its domestic, international development, humanitarian, global health, disaster risk and climate adaptation policies and plans. People of all ages, in all their diversity, have much to gain from the Government's commitment to break down the barriers that prevent older women from realising their rights and enjoying representation. This would build whole communities' resilience to crises and shocks, boost opportunity, and ensure all women and girls benefit from the Government's commitment to gender equality.

We urge the UK Government and its partners, including International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and UN agencies, to take the following actions to ensure older women's inclusion:

At CSW:

- Ensure an explicit focus on older women within inputs to the Beijing +30 and CSW69 discussions on CSW revitalisation and future themes.
- Reinforce previously agreed CSW language in the Political Declaration and across CSW69/ Beijing +30 discussions. This should include that relating to: the impact of extreme poverty on older women, older women's positive contributions to the economy and society, meaningful participation of older women, and the value of comprehensive social protection for groups including older women.
- Carry forward and address agreed recognition of the global gender pensions gap in future CSWs, including the implementation of recommendations on universal social protection.
- Reinforce commitments to disaggregating data by sex, age, disability, marital status and other characteristics to respond better to the needs of women and girls in all their diversity.
- Recognise the importance of the unpaid care contributions made by women of all ages that underpin economies, and commit to strengthening the vital public health and care infrastructure that carers need to secure their own rights as well as the rights of those requiring care and support.
- Restate the Sustainable Development Goal pledge to "Leave No One Behind", and bring this to the heart of CSW discussions involving global leadership on climate and cross cutting areas.
- Champion the representation of older women from poorer contexts at CSW and include representatives of older women's groups in Government delegations.

Beyond CSW:

- 1. The life course:** Implement the Government's commitment to embedding a life course approach, both domestically and internationally, that explicitly includes older women - recognising both older women's rights and the multigenerational co-dependencies that underpin daily life.
- 2. Data gathering and analysis:** Work with partners to ensure international data gathering and analysis on poverty, health and violence explicitly includes data on older people disaggregated by five-year age cohorts, as well as by sex and disability. Challenge ageist data caps in household surveys so that older people's diversity and experience are properly represented. Require programme partners to include older women in all relevant evidence gathering and monitoring.²⁶
- 3. Social protection:** Recognise that all social protection programmes need to be informed by a life course approach and an in-depth analysis that includes gender, age and disability-specific risks. Make this a part of disaster risk reduction, humanitarian recovery, and climate adaptation plans.
- 4. Health system strengthening:** Integrate Public Health England guidance on prevention and a life course perspective in the Government's global health policy and funding to ensure a more holistic approach that focuses on health system strengthening and primary health care in the community, with specific attention to older women's wellbeing.
- 5. Tackle violence against older women:** Address the gaps in tackling violence against older women - including the barriers of shame and stigma that prevent older women from reporting their experiences of violence, abuse and neglect.
- 6. Older women's economic empowerment:** Ensure that Women's Economic Empowerment policies, programmes and research capture the contributions of older women and support their rights.



- 7. Older People's Associations:** Promote and engage with Older People's Associations (OPAs) which strengthen older people's capacity for local leadership, provide community level support, and promote older women's economic empowerment.
- 8. Participation of older women at the grassroots:** Support older women's full participation as part of commitments to work with grassroots women's rights organisations, and build collaboration between existing grassroots groups such as women's rights organisations, disabled persons organisations and OPAs.
- 9. Protect the rights of older persons:** Support the creation of a new United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons that would strengthen and reinforce the rights of older women.
- 10. Digital inclusion:** Strengthen older women's digital inclusion through access to digital learning, age-friendly design of digital services, and ageism-free, ethical and safe digital environments that embrace the diversity of older women. Equally, guarantee the right of all older people to access public services non-digitally without penalty or negative impact.
- 11. Older women in emergencies:** Ensure the specific risks facing older women are considered in humanitarian responses, through strengthening disaggregated data in needs assessments, consulting older women, and adhering to the Humanitarian Inclusion Standards for Older People and People with Disabilities.
- 12. Older women's leadership in climate action:** Support locally led and multigenerational approaches to climate action and adaptation, ensuring older women's voices are heard in the decisions that affect their lives.



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Age International is a charity which responds to the needs and promotes the rights of older people, focused on those facing challenging situations in low and middle-income countries.

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