

# IN OUR OWN WORDS

WHAT OLDER PEOPLE SAY ABOUT  
DISCRIMINATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

IN OLDER AGE: A consultation by the  
Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People



The Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) is a network of over 115 civil society organisations from around the world who have come together to strengthen and promote the rights of older people.

Sarah Marzouk/  
HelpAge InternationalKate Holt/  
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## STRENGTHENING THE RIGHTS OF OLDER PEOPLE

A UN working group, the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing, was set up in 2010 to discuss how to better protect and promote the human rights of older people.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of five meetings, the working group has identified a number of gaps in protection of these rights.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the working group was tasked with considering proposals for an international legal instrument on the rights of older people.<sup>3</sup> At the end of 2014, UN Member States were invited to present concrete proposals, practical measures, best practices and lessons learned to improve the protection of the rights of older people. These will be compiled and submitted to the UN General Assembly at the end of 2015.<sup>4</sup> It is critical that older people are part of this debate and that their opinions and views inform these proposals.

## WHAT OLDER PEOPLE HAVE TO SAY

GAROP member organisations were invited in September-October 2014 to take part in a consultation to hear from older people and their representative organisations how older people are being discriminated against, what impact this has on their lives and why they think this is happening. They were also asked about what rights they felt older people were being denied. (See Annex 1 for the consultation questions.)

Just over 2000 people took part in the consultation from across 50 countries. (See Annex 2 for a list of countries.) The vast majority of participants were over the age of 50 with around 120 people under the age of 50. Approximately 55% of the participants were women and 45% were men.<sup>5</sup>

People were invited to respond as individuals or as part of group discussions. Participants were self-selecting so their responses cannot be considered to be a representative sample of GAROP membership or of older people more generally. This report presents the themes and issues raised by the participants. It uses their own words, expressions and phrases and their responses have not been weighted in any way.

## DISCRIMINATION IN OLDER AGE: A COMMON EXPERIENCE

The vast majority of participants said that they were treated differently and discriminated against because of their older age.

“South Africa is no different to most other nations, in that older persons often are discriminated against or experience inequality in society.”  
*From a group discussion, South Africa*

Some participants said they were treated differently some of the time but not always. Most of those who said they were not treated differently themselves went on to describe how and why other older people were discriminated against.

“I don't get discriminated because of my old age but I do think some elders are affected by it.”  
*Male, 60-69 years, Mongolia*

Of those who said they were not treated differently, some said they were not treated differently yet, or that they were not treated differently because they were still active, in good health or working.

“As I still work part-time, I have not encountered discrimination as yet.”  
*Female, 70-79 years, Australia*

Many of the participants under the age of 50 described age-related discrimination that they were already facing in their forties in the labour market.

“Even when I apply to an offer for a job that suits perfectly my professional and scholar background I have never been asked for at least a first interview. And when I was younger it wasn't like that!”  
*Female, 40-49 years, Italy*

A few participants said that the different treatment they experienced was sometimes positive.

“Differently treated: yes absolutely – in some situations for the better, in some for worse!”  
*From a group discussion, all over 60 years, Denmark*

Only a very few of the participants said they were always treated better because of their older age.

“I am glad because of my old age I am treated accordingly and given priority wherever I go.”  
*Female, 60-69 years, Brunei Darussalam*

## HOW OLDER PEOPLE ARE TREATED DIFFERENTLY AND DISCRIMINATED AGAINST

Older people described how they are being treated differently across different aspects of their lives: within their individual relationships with family members and people they work with; within their community and social networks; and at an institutional level where they said older people are not considered in government policies, legislation, by the community or by civil society organisations.

They described being ignored, avoided, dismissed and treated with suspicion.

*“The doctor avoids touching me when consulting me.”*

*From a group discussion, Cameroon*

Some older people talked of being subjected to different types of violence and abuse including physical, verbal and psychological violence and abuse, neglect and abandonment in different settings as well as and being forced out of their property.

*“In the home they terrorise us, they take all our money, they don’t give us allowances and they constantly threaten that we’ll be kicked out if we don’t behave.”*

*Nursing home resident, from a group discussion, Serbia*

Older people described being excluded from social activities, financial services, political processes, economic life, development activities and leadership positions. They have been denied access to goods and services such as health care, care and support for independent living, palliative care and end of life care, education, social security, information, appropriate housing, financial services, employment, transport, new technology, public buildings and an accessible environment more broadly.

*“At my age we are not able to get a decent bank credit or start paying health insurance just because you are more than 65 years old.”*

*From a group discussion, all over 50 years, Argentina*

Some older people have been accused of witchcraft. Some described being subjected to intersectional discrimination based on their age and other characteristics such as gender, marital, economic and physical or mental health status.

*“I think I will never get past second class – first because I am female and now because I am older.”*

*Female, 70-79 years, USA*

However, a few participants described how they were treated better because of their older age.

*“I have an age regulated driving test each year. I am helped with grocery shopping.”*

*Female, over 80 years, Australia*

## THE EFFECT THIS HAS ON OLDER PEOPLE’S LIVES

Being treated in a discriminatory way has a considerable impact on the way older people feel.

For the majority of participants, being treated differently and being discriminated against had a negative effect on their lives. They described feeling stigmatised, humiliated, condescended to and patronised. Some participants felt insecure and frightened of physical and verbal abuse, of losing their job or of going out.

*“I know that there are lonely, terrified older people in rural areas who are depressed, who feel cut off and afraid to speak up for themselves.”*

*Male, 70-79 years, Ireland*

Others were concerned about their future.

*“I see myself without a future.”*

*Male, 50-59 years, Italy*

Others felt lonely, isolated, excluded, alienated and neglected. Many described feeling invisible, forgotten, unwanted, unnecessary and devalued.

*“I easily withdraw from society and I feel shabby.”*

*Male, 50-59 years Republic of Korea*

*“We feel isolated and alienated as if we are animals.”*

*Female, over 60 years, Uganda*

*“At times I feel affected and lonely especially when I am told that what is being done and discussed is not for me as I am old.”*

*Female, 50-59 years, Uganda*



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Older people described being disempowered and disenfranchised and being unable to speak out. For some this lack of voice and not being able to make their own decisions made them feel frustrated and constrained. Some felt disappointed, bitter, angry and annoyed. Others were made to feel useless and incapable, unproductive and a burden on others.

*“People do not trust me because they fear I may not deliver because of my age.”  
From a group discussion, Mozambique*

Older people described how being treated differently and being discriminated against affected their well-being and quality of life. Many talked about the negative impact it had on both their physical and mental health reporting poor nutrition, a shorter life span, boredom, low self-esteem, low self-confidence, feeling depressed and in two cases thinking about suicide.

*“It can be very depressing. Being blamed for the state of the nation so to speak! Older people are accused of being ‘bed blockers’ in hospitals, and the virtual collapse of the national health system, wholly responsible for people having to work longer. Blamed for taking jobs off younger workers, because older people should ‘give way’ to younger people.”  
Unknown sex, 60–69 years, Wales UK*

Others talked about having reduced opportunities to take on new challenges and projects and to be an equal member in the family and society in their older age. For some being treated differently because of their older age resulted in increased poverty, being forced to beg, to sleep rough and to turn to alcohol.

Those who reported being treated better because they are older said that it had no effect on their lives or a positive one, including being entitled to reduced fares on public transport, for computer classes, access to museums, concerts and other social activities.

*“I am happy and I am satisfied with my life.”  
Female, over 80 years, Czech Republic*

*“We are treated differently certainly, that is with more respect and kindness than when we were young and energetic. It is a Quranic injunction that is adhered to, thank God. It makes me feel good to be treated like an old precious relic, and to be in harmony with the world.”  
Female, 70–79 years, Pakistan*

## DISCRIMINATION ON THE BASIS OF OLDER AGE: WHY IT IS HAPPENING

Participants were asked why they think older people are treated differently or discriminated against.

A very small number of the participants said they were treated differently in a positive way because of respect for older people.

*“I am not treated differently, at least not yet. I am 60 years old and I live in Greece where – at least for my generation – there is respect for older people and a strong feeling of obligation towards the family (i.e. the youngest serving the oldest).”  
Female, 60–69 years, Greece*

Those who said they were treated differently and discriminated against with a negative effect gave reasons for this which included ignorance, misconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices about older people and older age.

*“Older people are treated differently because of the prevailing prejudices and stereotypes in the society.”  
Female, 70–79 years, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*

A view that was repeatedly expressed was that older people are thought to be a burden on society, on families, on the healthcare system, on the economy, on the welfare system. They are seen as incompetent, incapable and useless, unable to work efficiently, profitably or productively. As such they are expendable and obsolete.

*“I am considered a spent force with nothing left to contribute to society. That I have had my turn and should give way to the youth.”  
Male, 70–79 years, Uganda*

*“Old people are of no use, cost money and might have a lot of problems that can be frustrating if it is difficult to solve them.”  
Female, 60–69 years, Sweden*

*“Sometimes, I don’t know if [I am treated differently] as a sign of respect or as seeing me as useless and not productive.”  
Male, 70–79 years, Spain*



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The view that older people are rigid and inflexible in their thinking and ideas, uninteresting, politically conservative, ignorant, poorly educated, uncivilised and out of touch and unable to keep up with the pace of modern life and technology was also a common theme.

“I think some people think that older people are no longer capable of keeping up all the time and are stuck in old concepts but my experience is that is not so.”

*Female, 70-79 years, Australia*

Participants said older people are stereotyped as confused, of unsound mind, senile and unable to make their own decisions. They are seen as difficult to handle, child-like and a nuisance that needs to be dealt with.

“People love us because we are old but think we are incapable of doing things.”

*From a group discussion, Mauritius*

“There is a general ageism still in our culture that devalues old age relative to youth, that expects older adults to be decrepit and demented.”

*Female, 70-79 years, USA*

Deeply stigmatising and dehumanising ageist attitudes towards older people’s physical appearance were also given as reasons why they were treated differently. Participants said older people are considered dirty, unhygienic and ugly, assumed to be no longer sexually attractive or active.

“The image of young and beautiful, well-looking is now a motto. There is no place for outsiders.”

*Female, 60-69 years, Faroe Islands*

This deviation from the ideal norm that everyone should look young, wrinkle-free, have no grey hair or decline in their physical and mental function was seen as underpinning the discrimination older people are subjected to, as was the fear of getting older and dying.

“Some sickness may occur as life goes on, which is also looked upon in today’s society as a bad mark.”

*Female, 50-59 years, Finland*

Conflict between generations also came out in the responses as reasons for discrimination of older people. The idea that older people are thought to have had their time, to be less equal than the young, to have caused the current problems of the younger generation, and are taking resources such as medicine, jobs and education away from the young came through in many of the responses. The lack of communication and time spent between the young and old was said to contribute to this gap between generations.

“It surprised me how children and young people show love and respect for the elderly in their family (grandparents, uncles etc.) and yet disrespect and ignore the elderly outside.”

*Male, over 80 years, Spain*

External factors such as the increasing numbers of older people and the limited resources that states are devoting to them, (e.g. on housing and public transport) were also given as reasons for older people being treated differently and discriminated against. The absence of international or national legislation and policy on older people’s rights and the exclusion of older people from data and surveys was said to be discriminatory.

“Older people are treated differently or discriminated against because of the lack of national policies to protect older people and improve the quality of their life.”

*From a group discussion, Liberia*

Some participants said that the market economy means that employers and labour markets discriminate in favour of cheap, younger labour. Older people’s poverty and lack of access to pensions and social security was said to reduce their financial power and lower their social status.

“Those without income and dependent are often ill-treated and side-lined by family and society.”

*From a group discussion, all over 60 years, Malaysia*

Changing family and living arrangements due to urbanisation, migration and different family structures were said to have led to a decline in respect and positive social values. The value given to success, wealth, individualism and a fast-paced society was also given as an underlying reason why older people are discriminated against. Some participants said that experience and age are no longer valued by society and there is a lack of respect for, and understanding and education about, older people’s rights.

“Experience and knowledge of ‘life’ is not considered to be of value in our society, so older people are not respected.”

*Female, 50-59 years, Wales UK*

## WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: A HUMAN RIGHTS SOLUTION

Participants were asked whether they think older people are denied any of their human rights and which ones. Their responses included the denial of general principles that underpin human rights such as autonomy, respect and dignity. Participants also identified a number of specific rights affecting many aspects of their lives which they believe are being denied.

### PRINCIPLES

- Non-discrimination
- Respect
- Dignity
- Autonomy
- Equality
- Self-fulfilment and personal development
- Full and effective participation
- Social inclusion
- Inter-generational solidarity
- Recognition of intrinsic value and worth as a human being

### HUMAN RIGHTS

#### Non-discrimination

The right to non-discrimination in all aspects of their lives including health care, financial services, employment, goods and services, inheritance and property and taxation. The responses also reflected experience of intersectional discrimination including on the grounds of age and gender, cultural/linguistic diversity, disability, physical or mental status, economic status and access to technology.

#### Right to autonomy and independence

The right to autonomy in different aspects of older people's lives including in making decisions about their support and care and their leisure time, their right to self-determination and choice and to personal freedom.

#### Right to equal recognition before the law

The right to equal recognition before the law including the right to be complete citizens, including the right to be registered and to be an equal member of the family and of society.

#### Right to self-fulfilment

The right to continue to live lives of self-fulfilment and personal development up until the last day of life, to be hopeful and to have a future, and to take on new challenges and opportunities.

#### Right to life

The right to life including when they are killed for allegedly being witches.

The following section outlines the principles and human rights identified by the participants together with any detail that they also provided on specific components of these rights. It is not an exhaustive list of all human rights but the participants' collective response clearly suggests that a comprehensive and systematic approach to better protection and promotion of their rights is required.

#### Right to a dignified death

The right to die with dignity, including choosing where and when to die, the right to holistic palliative care, including pain relief, and to end of life care.

#### Right to effective participation

The right to full and effective participation in all spheres of life: public, political, cultural, economic, in development activities, in decision making at household, community and national levels, and in social and leisure activities within the family and in the community.

#### Right to age in place

The right to choose living their arrangements, where and with whom they live and to remain in the community, regardless of physical or mental status.

#### Right to housing

The right to housing including that which is affordable, of good quality, appropriate, accessible, and designed to accommodate the older person's requirements.

#### Right to the environment

The right to live in a safe and healthy environment, including access to drinking water, sanitation and other services.

#### Right to accessibility and mobility

The right to accessibility and mobility, including accessible transport that is affordable, physically accessible, available, particularly in rural areas, and can be used without fear of abuse.

#### Right to long term support for independent living

The right to long term support including to a range of person-centred, quality, holistic social care and support services. The right includes the right to choose the type of care and support received: where (in own home, in community, in residential facility), when and from whom. It includes the right to freedom of movement in residential care settings. Ensuring quality of support includes the training of care providers and support and assistance for family members providing care. It also includes access to redress and complaints mechanisms.

#### Right to a family life

The right to a family life including the right to privacy and to a private life.

Jessie George/  
HelpAge InternationalClaire Catherine/  
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### Right to freedom from violence and abuse

The right to freedom from all forms of violence and abuse including from financial exploitation, physical and psychological violence, neglect and abandonment. It includes the right to access to justice, redress and support for victims.

### Right to freedom from torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment

The right to freedom from torture when the violence meets this threshold.

### Right to work

The right to work including non-discrimination on the basis of age in recruitment, the prohibition of mandatory retirement on the basis of age, decent working conditions and meaningful work, access to re-training for a changing workplace and support for unpaid work, including the care of others.

### Right to an adequate standard of living

The right to an adequate standard of living including income security, access to basic necessities and amenities, including water and sanitation, nutritious and affordable food, clothing and the right to the continuous improvement of living conditions.

### Right to social security and social protection

The right to social security including access to adequate pensions.

### Right to health

The right to health including accessibility of health services in terms of both non-discrimination on the basis of older age and distance and access to transport; affordability of services and treatment; availability of geriatric services, of medicines, of mental health care (including dementia and Alzheimer's Disease); appropriate health care and medication; quality of treatment and of diagnosis; timely treatment; and autonomy in terms of informed consent for, and choice of, treatment.

### Right to information

The right to information including information in accessible and appropriate formats. It includes information on a range of goods and services and on older people's rights and entitlements.

### Right to education

The right to education including life-long learning and skills training, for example vocational and on information and communication technology (ICT).

### Right to property

The right to property including the right to own property, to dispose of your own property and assets in the way that you want, and inheritance rights.

### Right to access to justice

The right to access to justice including the right to legal services.

### Right to freedom of expression

The right to freedom of expression including the right to be heard and to pass on knowledge and experience.

### Right to freedom of movement

The right to freedom of movement including in residential care settings.

### Right to freedom of association and assembly

The right to form older people's groups and associations.

## OLDER PEOPLE IN PARTICULAR SITUATIONS

Participants identified situations where older people might experience particular risk of rights violations including:

- Older people living in various care settings where they are dependent on others for support with a range of activities.
- Older prisoners including their right to appropriate accommodation in prisons, to release from prison if no longer a threat to society and to support on re-entry into society on release from prison.
- Older women, where gender and age related discrimination intersect.

## ANNEX 1: CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that you are treated differently or discriminated against because of your older age?
2. How does this affect you in your everyday life?
3. Why do you think older people are treated differently or discriminated against?
4. Do you think that older people are denied any of their human rights? Which ones?

## ANNEX 2: COUNTRIES THAT THE CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS CAME FROM

Argentina	Malaysia
Australia	Malta
Austria	Mauritius
Bangladesh	Moldova
Belgium	Mongolia
Brunei Darussalam	Mozambique
Bulgaria	Netherlands
Cambodia	Pakistan
Cameroon	Poland
Croatia	Portugal
Cyprus	Republic of Korea
Czech Republic	Romania
Denmark	Serbia
Faroe Islands	Slovenia
Finland	South Africa
Germany	Spain
Ghana	Sweden
Greece	Switzerland
Iceland	Tanzania
Ireland	Uganda
Italy	United Kingdom
Kenya	USA
Liberia	Zimbabwe
Former Yugoslavic Republic of Macedonia	Unidentified country (3 responses)
Malawi	

1. UN resolution A/65/182, 2010
2. See the UN Open-ended Working Group website for records of the five meetings, <http://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/>
3. UN resolution A/67/139, 2012
4. UN resolution A/69/146, 2014
5. We cannot provide precise percentages due to some discrepancies in the demographic information provided by the participants on the consultation response forms.

This report was written by Bridget Sleep, HelpAge International, on behalf of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People

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