On the intersection between gender, age, migration and the care economy with a specific focus on universal rights to social protection

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Good afternoon. Many thanks to the organisers for this important panel, and for inviting me to it.

A few points of context. Gender shapes our world, and gender shapes ageing. Social protection is a human right which is essential for social cohesion and to tackle poverty and exclusion yet denied currently to millions. Millions are on the move as migrants, asylum seekers, victims of persecution, yet are denied support and vilified. And ageing is our present and our future. We are seeing longer lives in every country and region in the world, with women living longest everywhere, making up 54% of people aged 60+ globally and 62% of those aged 80+.

But do we know what is happening to older people, and older women in particular?

The evidence tells us that older women face higher risks of chronic health burdens, income inequality and old-age poverty.

Evidence also tells us, if we notice and look hard, that older women make essential contributions to their own and extended households, through their labour, their income – even if it's a tiny social pension - and the care they give to the young and the old, in domestic and institutional settings.

The SG has just released a report where he asks us – we the peoples and their governments - to debunk the myths that chronological age determines productivity, that older workers take jobs from youth, and that rising dependency or poor health are inevitable with age. He emphasized that longer lives create both risks and opportunities and calls on governments to adapt intersecting economic and social structures to maximise opportunities along the interlocking emphases of development, health and the enabling environment. No less important is his call for awareness of and support for global advocacy on ageing, and the urgency of the participation and voice of older people to combat discrimination. The report urges alignment of policies on ageing with existing global frameworks and the human right frameworks supported by the collection, analysis and use of age disaggregated data from birth till death.

So, how are we doing?

I have looked at 8 global frameworks I have looked at for this talk. They all speak to the issues of this panel. We may have these frameworks; do we know about them and use them? A question.

In terms of older women how aware are we of the extent of their contributions – and are we ready to make governments accountable to deliver their commitments?

Sometimes anecdotes work best. Some years ago older women, grandmothers mainly, went on strike in Spain. Taken for granted, but unsupported financially, to be caretakers of the grandchildren so their parents could work. A worldwide phenomenon you might say. The strike caused complete havoc for a week. The Oxford Institute of Population Ageing did detailed research on this. Without

adequate and regular income support and good transport how can grandparents deliver care to their charges?

UNFPA and HelpAge produced in 2012 the only UN system-wide book on population ageing, 'Ageing in the 21st Century: A Celebration and a Challenge'. Drawing on women's testimonies, the chapter on violence against older women revealed—perhaps for the first time—the scale and severity of the psychological, physical and financial abuse they experienced. Contributing partners were shocked and ashamed.

A recent data study conducted in Malawi with the UNDESA found that it was the older women who were the mainstay of the rural homesteads but they were the hungriest and least served by health schemes, brushing away their chronic health problems as 'old age'.

In the UK older people in remote country areas underserved by transport have malnutrition.

In terms of work and adaptation to the digital world age discrimination flourishes in both private and public spheres due to discriminatory laws, patriarchal norms and structural barriers. Women enjoy less than two thirds of the legal rights available to men. The age of retirement for women is lower than that of men in 62 economies.

When men migrate, older women—often widows—may remain in their country of origin, caring for children, managing households and supporting relatives. Remittances alone cannot provide a regular, secure income; paid work and pensions are also essential to sustain families and care systems. Yet informal employment, interrupted contributions and migration often leave older women without adequate protection later in life. Older migrant women are concentrated in low-paid or informal sectors, particularly domestic work, care homes and hospitality, where labour protections are weak. Restrictive immigration policies may tie them to temporary contracts or employer-specific visas. Interrupted employment, ongoing caregiving and migration later in life can prevent them from building contributory pensions, leaving them especially economically insecure. Fear of seeking services, combined with social and language barriers, precarious housing and hostility in some host countries and communities, means many go without adequate income or healthcare.

The right to universal social protection and access of all older women whatever their nationality to the guarantees of the social protection floor are therefore urgent. There is a way to go though, with feet dragging on financing and weak political will remaining the stubborn elephants in the room. Currently only 52.4 per cent of the global population is covered by even one social protection benefit; the remaining 47.6 per cent — disproportionately informal and rural workers - with the burden of this failure falling hardest on older women. ILO report 1 in 5 older people are without social protection; UN Women reported in 2024 that 2 billion women and girls had no access to social protection.; HelpAge reports in 2026 only 6 countries in Africa have a social pension; but in terms of financing HelpAge's pension watch reports that the cost to 60 countries that do have social pensions is less than 1% of GDP while a further 18 cost between 1-2% of GDP. SDG 1 target 3, The Compromiso de Sevilla and the Doha Declaration are very clear about the right of all to social protection and its benefits. So what do we have to do to ensure its rollout?

What can we do?

In the first place we must use the existing normative framework of human rights and human rights tools both to draw attention to what needs to be done and insist on human rights compliant policies.

Secondly in relation to older women we must invite their voice and participation; 'nothing about us without us.'

Thirdly the goal of universal social protection as a fundamental right of all and the roll out and financing of social protection floors in all counties must be prioritised, supported by a global financing mechanism and underpinned by data on coverage and cost, and south- south and south-north partnerships.

Finally we have the opportunity now to put our efforts into the completion of the work for a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. The Human Rights Council has established an intergovernmental working group to elaborate such a legally binding instrument. The experiences of both migrant women and the older women who remain behind should be heard in that process.

In the memorable words of Osei Darkwa: 'The mark of a noble society is found not in the manner in which it helps the rich, but in how it helps the poor…not in how it protects the powerful, but how it defends the vulnerable.'

Thank you,

Sylvia Beales

References

1. **Ageing in the 21st Century; a Celebration and a challenge: UNFPA/HelpAge 2012 https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Ageing%20report.pdf**
2. **1991: General Assembly resolution 46/91 Principles of the Rights of Older persons, which are Care, Self-fulfilment, Participation, Independence and Dignity; Governments** are asked to incorporate these principles into their national programmes whenever possible, and many have sought to do so with varying degrees of success.
3. **A/RES/49/162 1994 'Integration of older women in development: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly.** The summary states: 'requests the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to pay particular attention to discrimination on grounds of age when evaluating national reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; invites the international development agencies and organizations, including the UN Development Fund for Women and UNDP, to take account of the potential of elderly women as a human resource for development and to include older women in their development strategies and programmes, and encourages Governments to ensure the inclusion of women, regardless of age, in development projects covered by national and multilateral financial institutions;' More can be done to make practical use of this recommendation.
4. **2020: CEDAW GR 38 Para 110. '**Disaggregate data collected on both victims and perpetrators of trafficking by all parameters considered relevant, including sex, age, disability, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, location, socioeconomic status and form of exploitation, in line with Sustainable Development Goal indicator 16.2.2, where permitted by national law.' Life course data collection on trafficking and its disaggregation by age is fundamental to progress; more is needed.
5. **The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), adopted in 2002,** which explicitly links population ageing to fundamental human rights, including the right to development; Article 5 We reaffirm the commitment to spare no effort to promote democracy, strengthen the rule of law and promote gender equality, as well as to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development. We commit ourselves to eliminating all forms of discrimination, including age discrimination.' The 3 priority areas highlighted in MIPAA against which governments report to the UN every

5 years are 'Development, Health and the Enabling Environment' (which covers violence, discrimination and participation.) MIPAA gave us the language 'Societies for all ages'.

6. **2012 ILO Recommendation 202: Social protection floors and basic social security guarantees**; effective access to essential health care and basic income security throughout the life course with social security guarantees, defined nationally to: essential health care, including maternity care; basic income security for children ,basic income security for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability; basic income security for older persons. (the minimum package). This is the 3rd target in SDG 1 (no poverty).
7. **2015 - The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which** integrates global ageing through its core pledge to "Leave No One Behind," which should ensure that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address all people at all ages - with specific language and targets in goals 1 (poverty), 3 (Health) , 5 (gender) , 8, (work) 10 (inequality, 11 (cities) and 17 (partnerships and data)
8. 2026 FFD4 Outcome Document: Sevilla Commitment (Compromiso de Sevilla)
9. The **Doha Political Declaration**, adopted in November 2025 at the **Second World Summit for Social Development.** The declaration highlights the urgency of gender inclusion and how gender disadvantages accumulate across a person's life and leave older women highly vulnerable to poverty, isolation, and systemic exclusion.