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HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL  
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Agenda item 3

**PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIL,  
POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS,  
INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT**

**Joint written statement\* submitted by HelpAge International (HAI), International Alliance of Women (IAW), International Council of Women (ICW-CIF), International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), International Federation of Associations of the Elderly (FIAPA), International Federation of Business and Professional Women (IFBPW), International Federation on Ageing (IFA), Soroptimist International (SI), Women's Federation for World Peace International (WFWPI), Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status, International Council of Jewish Women (ICJW), World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH), Worldwide Organization for Women (WOW), African Commission of Health and Human Rights Promoters (ACHHRP), American Psychological Association (APA), International Council of Psychologists (ICP), International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Federation of University Women (IFUW), World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH), International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA), Pan Pacific and Southeast Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA), Solar Cookers International (SCI), The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), Women's World Summit Foundation (WWSF), World Federation of Mental Health (WFMH), non-governmental organizations in special consultative status, International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), Gray Panthers, Indian Council of South America (CISA), International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG), International Association of the Third Age Universities (IAUTA), UNESCO Centre Basque Country (UNESCO ETXEA) and World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), non-governmental organizations on the Roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 February 2009]

\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **Urgent Call to Protect Older Women and their Human Rights**

*We call upon the Human Rights Council to recognize urgently the human rights of older women and to support the effort of the Working Group established November 2008 by the CEDAW Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to draft a General Comment on the Rights of Older Women.*

The last 60 years have seen an unprecedented rise in life expectancy worldwide. Recent data of the UN Population Division indicate that there are already more people aged 60 years and over than young people under 15 in some regions of the world, and that the majority of older persons, especially in very old age are women.

Gender statistics worldwide provide clear and systemic evidence of the gendered nature of ageing and the specificity of the condition of women in old age. Their need for special rights and protection calls for urgent attention. Clear evidence exists of *the “feminization of ageing” worldwide and this is generally acknowledged:*

- women’s life expectancy is higher than men’s;
- the majority of those living beyond 80 years are women (often more than 70% of that group);
- older women are more likely to be widowed, whereas men are more likely to die while still married;
- women experience living alone in old age more than men with specific physical, psychosocial and material needs;
- ageing women have a higher prevalence of chronic diseases, both physical and mental, hence need more long term health care and treatment;
- older women suffer from higher poverty rates than men, although they have a lifelong history of informal work and care in the family and in the community;
- data are not disaggregated by age and gender and few international studies focus on differences in the aging experience of women compared to men.

At the UN Assembly on Ageing in 2002, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan called population ageing a *“silent revolution”*. This silent revolution has silenced a vast array of neglected human rights issues of old age and given the above mentioned facts, older women are the first victims of age-related human rights violation due to physical and psycho-social vulnerability and to their particular life conditions.

*Older women frequently experience multiple and cumulative forms of discrimination and disadvantages during their life course: gender, age, illiteracy, poverty, ethnic origin, chronic diseases and disabilities which all interact.*

*Firstly there are more women reaching the age of 80 and over than men, with less education than men, fewer rights and less able to defend their rights: they are more often exposed to widowhood and loneliness and are subject to different types of discrimination and abuse (sexual, medical and financial). It has been brought to the attention of the international community that unprecedented forms of aggression are reported against older women and some are raped because they supposedly are not infected with HIV/AIDS.*

*Secondly, men and women age differently yet their specific needs are ignored. Old age for women is too often a period where discrimination is exacerbated by the cumulative effect of*

lifelong gender-based discrimination, in the family and professional life and through their physical vulnerability which leads to multiple abuse and neglect of their fundamental rights. For example, all too often through poverty, indecent working conditions or underpaid jobs with little or no access to formal social security, even when available, they lack a high enough income to survive in decent conditions until the end of their life. This includes fundamental needs such as adequate nutrition, housing and access to health care and treatment.

*Considered no longer reproductively or economically useful, many older women are seen as a burden to their families and communities while their status is ignored by policy-makers, hence these women are marginalized, isolated and even abandoned. They are vulnerable to many forms of abuse, too often aimed at depriving them of their assets such as inheritance and property rights.*

*We strongly recommend to those in charge of humanitarian aid to pay attention to the particularly vulnerable group of older women refugees and those in war and conflict situations.*

Furthermore, despite the importance of gender/age differences for effective interventions in all areas, very few directives exist. For example, *ethical guidelines in biomedical research have not yet addressed the specificity of old age with gender in their protocols*, which result in higher risks of registered and manufactured medical products for older women's health in all regions of the world.

*No binding legal international document exists either on old age or older women.* Furthermore, key UN documents, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Millennium Development Goals, omit any mention of age.

We wish to underline that the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995 did not explicitly mention the issue of older women* despite the fact that they are more vulnerable to violence, poverty and discrimination on the labour market.

*Therefore we request the improvement of efficient anti-poverty programmes and public health measures for older women in particular.*

When revising chronologically UN documents, we must acknowledge that *hardly any UN outcome document mentioned specifically older women as a distinct category:*

- In 1975, the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico City merely mentioned older women as an issue on the international agenda for the first time. The second UN Women's Conference, in Copenhagen in 1980, called for an emphasis on older women. In 1982, the first UN Plan of Action on Ageing made only one recommendation out of 62 concerning the inequities faced by older women.
- *It was only in 1985 at the Women's Conference in Nairobi that the status of older women received attention* on account of their longevity compared with men. For the first time, ageing was recognized as a developmental stage in the life cycle of women and the necessary elements for a plan of action were mentioned in one paragraph (A/Conf.116/28, par. 286).
- *In 1995, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted for the first time the General Comment No.6 on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Older Persons* (Doc E/1996/22, Annex IV) and *the Specific Provisions of Article 3 of the Covenant mentioning equal rights of men and women*. The Committee considered then that State Parties "should pay particular attention to older women who, because they have spent

all or part of their lives caring for their families without engaging in a remunerated activity entitling them to an old-age pension, with no rights to a widow's pension either, often find themselves in critical situations".

Therefore, in the light of the importance of the above, the above mentioned non-governmental Organisations in Consultative Status with ECOSOC, request the Human Rights Council to urge Member States:

- to support the CEDAW Working Group which was recently established to draft a General Recommendation on the Human Rights of Older Women;
- to work further on drafting a Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons, including the rights of older women; such a convention was already requested in 2002 by the NGO community;
- to designate a Special Rapporteur on the Specific Situation of Older Women at the Human Rights Council, including all aspects related to the violation of their human rights;
- to mainstream older women's right in all the items of the work programme of the Human Rights Council;
- to require that UN data be systematically disaggregated by gender and age and that more international studies be conducted on differential ageing between men and women;
- to revise the International Ethical Guidelines to address the cumulative factors of old age and gender in all programmes, studies and protocols (i.e. WHO, UNESCO, etc.);
- finally, to establish an international surveillance and protection mechanism to monitor the financial abuse of older women and the protection of their human rights, especially in war and conflicts, as well as refugee and humanitarian situations. Such a mechanism would require the development and application of specific international legislations monitored by the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

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