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Statement submitted by HelpAge International and International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

“I was threatened several times and I used to receive letters accusing me of being a witch. The letters said: ‘You take your last meal today. You won’t survive the night. You will be killed because you are a witch’.” Shiduki, 71, United Republic of Tanzania.

Introduction: the hidden violence against older women

According to “World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision”, in 2010, there were 746 million women over the age of 49 and, by 2020, there will be 970 million.

Surveys on violence against women rarely collect data after the age of 49. The majority, for example, the World Health Organization multi-country studies and demographic health surveys, have a cut-off age of 49. The “International violence against women survey” has a cut-off age of 69, but has been conducted in a very limited number of countries.

As a result, the violence and abuse that the vast majority of the 746 million women over 49 may currently be experiencing is going unrecorded and not being captured in the research.

Population ageing is defining the twenty-first century. As the number of older women increases, so will the number exposed to different forms of violence and abuse.

This critical information gap has significant implications. It makes it impossible for States to monitor progress on their human rights obligations on freedom from violence. It conceals patterns of violence against older women. It results in their subsequent exclusion from prevention and rehabilitation policies and programmes.

Failure to address all forms of violence

Often, data collected on violence against women is limited to that of physical and sexual violence. What little data there is shows that older women, many of whom have experienced violence throughout their lives, are exposed to different types of violence: physical, sexual, economic, psychological and neglect.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations has cited violence and abuse against older people as a priority concern (A/66/173). Older women are disproportionately affected. In many societies, being widowed or single, either because of divorce or never having married, profoundly changes older women’s status in society. The physical and mental impact on older women of a lifetime of gender-based discrimination and violence can be profound, limiting their capacity to access services, make decisions and participate in their communities, rendering them more vulnerable to exploitation. Gender-based discrimination can also be exacerbated by ageism, which can result in violence and abuse against older women in their homes or in institutional care settings. Inheritance laws often deny women the right to own or inherit property. Family members and others often force widows off their land or seize their property.

A study in Kenya showed that 60 per cent of older women were being abused by their daughters-in-law, who were preventing them from getting regular food, warm clothes, adequate shelter and medical attention.

A study in Mozambique in 2011 showed that, in the six months prior to the study, 62 per cent of women over the age of 50 had experienced violence. The most common form of abuse was economic abuse (47 per cent) followed by emotional and psychological abuse (37 per cent), witchcraft accusations (21 per cent), physical abuse (11 per cent) and sexual abuse (5 per cent). Violence was more prevalent in peri-urban areas than in rural areas and tended to increase with the age of the respondents. Relatives were mentioned as the main perpetrators at home, while neighbours were mentioned in the community. According to the study, only 3 out of 10 older women report such cases.

Violence against older women can occur as a result of harmful traditional beliefs. Witchcraft-related killings were condemned in the 2009 report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/11/2) and the 2012 report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and its consequences (A/HRC/20/16). This is an issue of great concern to the many older women who, because of their age and gender, are accused of witchcraft and as a result can be subjected to the most extreme forms of violence and murder, crimes that are often met with impunity. In the United Republic of Tanzania, for example, data from police reports from eight regions from 2004 to February 2009 show that 2,585 older women were killed as a result of witchcraft accusations. In Mwanza region alone, 698 older women were killed during that period, which equates to two killings every two to three days.

What little data there is on elder abuse across Europe shows that more women than men are victims and that being a woman is one of the main risk factors, as is being over the age of 74.

A study on intimate partner violence against older women in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland found that the older the woman is, the harder it is to cope and seek help. Emotional attachment to where they have lived all their lives is the most common factor cited for not being able to leave home. Older women have often experienced a lifetime or very long periods of violence. This often results in very low self-esteem and high levels of dependency in older age, making it hard to end a long-term relationship. This older generation has a high level of family responsibility and family violence is considered a private matter. Younger women seem to seek help earlier and more often; older women assume they have to cope with their situation alone and in isolation.

Exclusion from elimination and prevention responses

Despite this, older women and the different forms of violence they are subjected to continue to be excluded from the debate and responses on violence against women.

In the 15-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly in 2010, only 4 out of 121 national responses to a questionnaire sent out by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) mentioned violence against older women, and only a further 7 included information on elder abuse more broadly. UN-Women does not report that older women are disproportionately subjected to elder abuse in its statistics on its website on violence against women and girls. Other United Nations agencies also neglect older women in their data. For example, the core indicators of the Joint

United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) for global AIDS response progress reporting, include an indicator on women aged 15 to 49 who have experienced physical or sexual violence, actively exclude older women. The preparatory expert group meeting and online consultation for the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women also failed to include violence against older women.

The current international human rights system does little to shed light on violence against older women or to help Governments to understand their obligations to protect and promote older women's rights. General recommendation No. 27 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, on older women and the protection of their human rights, is a major step forward in understanding the specific nature of age- and gender-related violence. However, other existing human rights standards do not adequately cover issues of critical importance for older women, such as violence and elder abuse. Often this is because older women are seen to be covered by inclusive terminology such as "and other vulnerable groups". The specific nature of the discrimination or violation of rights they experience, therefore, gets lost and, as a result, older women remain invisible in United Nations human rights mechanisms.

Action at the domestic level varies, resulting in inconsistent levels of protection across different countries. Some countries, for example Kenya, have provisions in their constitutions protecting older people from violence. Others have national legislation protecting older people from violence and abuse, for example, China, India, Japan, Mauritius, Nepal, South Africa and the United States of America. Others cite older people as specifically vulnerable in their domestic violence legislation, for example Ghana, Malawi, Namibia and Slovenia, where elder abuse is implied as a form of domestic violence. This patchwork of protection undermines the universality of human rights and every woman's right to freedom from violence and abuse throughout every stage of her life.

Recommendations

As with all forms of violence, elder abuse and violence against older women is preventable. Coordinated action is urgently needed to improve policy responses at the national and international levels on elder abuse, with specific regard to violence against older women. Education and awareness campaigns are essential to change negative social and cultural attitudes towards older women. However, there is a paucity of quality research on prevalence and prevention, meaning that evidence-based programmes are few and far between.

The following three actions would help to address this:

- Collect, disaggregate and disseminate data on violence against women beyond the age of 49
- Improve the measurement of psychological and economic violence
- Increase research on underdocumented forms of violence against women, including psychological and economic violence.