



## **Economic and Social Council**

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

#### **Fifty-seventh session**

4-15 March 2013

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women  
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled  
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace  
for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic  
objectives and action in critical areas of concern and  
further actions and initiatives**

### **Statement submitted by Agewell Foundation, a non-governmental organization 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**

### **Status of women in India, with a special focus on elderly women**

“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”.

— Jawaharlal Nehru

The Constitution of India grants women equal rights with men, but strong patriarchal traditions persist, with women’s lives shaped by customary practices that are centuries old. In most Indian families, even today a daughter is viewed as a liability, and she is conditioned to believe that she is secondary to men.

With a population of 591.4 million females, India represents almost 17.31 per cent of the world’s population, which means every sixth woman on this planet lives in India. Studies suggest that women are characterized by vast regional differences and a variety of cultures. However, social discrimination and economic deprivation on the basis of gender is common to all, irrespective of religion, caste, community or State, and India is not an exception. The sex ratio in India favours men (940:1,000) as does the male literacy rate in India, which is 75.96 per cent as compared to the female literacy rate of 54.28 per cent. Women and girls receive far less education than men, due to social norms. Therefore, India has the largest population of non-school-going working girls in the world.

India’s maternal mortality rates in rural areas are among the highest in the world. The estimates nationwide are that only 40 to 50 per cent of women receive any antenatal care. Some estimates suggest that some 5 million abortions are performed annually in India, with the large majority being illegal.

Being an agriculture-dominated country, women have to work longer hours and their work is more arduous than men’s. Women’s contribution to agriculture — whether it be subsistence farming or commercial agriculture — when measured in terms of the number of tasks performed and time spent, is greater than men’s. In addition, the responsibility of taking care of household chores is on women.

The major areas of discrimination against women in India are as follows:

#### **Malnutrition and poor health**

India has exceptionally high rates of child malnutrition, because tradition in India requires that women eat last and least throughout their lives, even when pregnant and lactating. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle. When they become old, their health condition worsens faster. Women receive less health care than males. Many women die in childbirth of easily prevented complications. Marriage of most girls at a younger age also has an adverse effect on their health condition.

#### **Unskilled labour and overwork**

Due to illiteracy and age-old customs, like “parda” (hiding the face), women work in unskilled jobs on farms or at their houses and remain marginalized in all walks of life. Though women work more than men, their work is unrecognized. Women remain busy with multiple tasks from dawn to dusk and hardly get enough time and space to rest.

**Lack of education or illiteracy**

Families are far less likely to educate girls than boys, and far more likely to pull them out of school, either to help out at home or on farms. This is a major cause of the pitiable condition of women.

**Mistreatment of women**

A male-dominated social mind set towards women provokes incidences of mistreatment of women in India. They are prone to sexual harassment, rapes, assaults and dowry-related murders. Female infanticide and sex-selective abortions are additional forms of violence against women.

**Violation of women's rights**

While women are guaranteed equality under the Constitution, legal protection has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions. At every stage of their lives, women face the violation of their rights. They are deprived of an education in childhood, they are married off according to their family members' choice and they remain dependent throughout their lives.

The Government of India has initiated several programmes and schemes for women's empowerment and protection of their rights, and society is witnessing the change. Still, the reality on the ground is more or less the same in the majority of rural areas. Overall, the living condition of Indian women is dismal, and there is a pressing need to improve the situation.

**Older women in India**

Whereas in the total Indian population, the sex ratio favours males, for the elderly (over 60 years of age) it favours elderly women by 1,022:1,000. In traditional Indian society, women are treated as a responsibility. Even if the parents are reluctant, they remain responsible for the girl child invariably because of social pressures. With her, their responsibilities also grow. After marriage, women play a crucial role in their respective families, which automatically ensures basic social security as long as they are active and useful to the family.

But in old age this equation is completely reversed for most women. With their growing age, their role in the family decreases. It is in old age that women need greater security, but instead their support infrastructure, emotional connections and security get more fragile with every passing day. Their family members do not understand their own responsibilities towards older women, whose presence in the family and society is often ignored. Older women invariably become redundant for all concerned.

Older women's children are settled in their own lives, and their husbands remain mostly aloof, primarily because of their own preoccupations, or die before them. This is the age when the women need a lot; instead they have to suffer a lot. With no social security, no gainful engagement opportunities, no old-age-related support and facilities, no shelter, no rights or fewer than before and, above all, no awareness, their life is full of physical, social, emotional and financial insecurities. They suffer silently, but cannot afford to complain, essentially because there is usually no one to listen to their complaints. Many older women suffer from loneliness and a heartfelt sense of redundancy.

## **Major concerns of elderly women**

### **Destitution, alienation and isolation**

Marginalization and isolation or alienation in old age are among the most common issues that affect older women constantly. The popularity of the nuclear family system has virtually crushed the strong traditional bond between grandchildren and grandmothers.

### **Social insecurity**

Older women who live in cities are more prone to social alienation or marginalization in comparison to older women who live in villages. The joint family system, to a certain extent, is still alive in rural areas. Older women who live in semi-urban situations or industrial townships also find it difficult to cope with old age, particularly after their children have grown up and their husbands retire.

### **Financial insecurity**

With the increased lifespan of older women, their financial needs are emerging as a major concern. However, today, many older women have property and/or money, but they cannot possibly use the money or take financial decisions on their own. Social traditions don't allow them to use their ancestral property or money for their own welfare.

### **Medical problems**

Due to negligence, a lack of awareness and financial support, and the religious mindset of women, older women often have to face acute health problems. Since most older women barely come out in open public places, most of their health problems remain unnoticed. Their family ignores their health problems, saying that in old age diseases are common.

### **Emotional insecurity**

Most older women face family problems, such as uncomfortable relations with their son and daughter-in-law and limited interaction with children and grandchildren. Their daughters-in-law do not like their interference in family matters, their children are busy with their jobs and their husbands invariably have mood swings after retirement and mostly restrict the women's free movement.

### **Violation of the human rights of older women**

Older women have to face age-related discrimination, mistreatment, harassment and elder abuse in their life due to the lack of awareness about their rights and the support system available to them in old age. Indian women have always been introverted by nature, that is why they are vulnerable and a soft target for wrongdoers. The human rights of elderly women are violated from time to time. A majority of the cases of human rights violations are due to the poverty of older women.

In India, core poverty among elderly women is due to a lack of nutritional food, potable water, shelter, sanitation, clothing and health care; relative poverty is

due to deprivation of literacy, information, equal livelihoods, leisure and recreation, and access to rights, savings and dignity.

Since there is no ray of hope in their present life and a long life ahead, older women find themselves completely lost. At this juncture, they have no option but to adjust themselves to their circumstances. For the sake of a peaceful and respectful life, they have to compromise with all sorts of odd situations and never complain about anything.

**Are we concerned?**

No society can achieve its social development goals by ignoring women's right to equal opportunities. India has a long way to go in ensuring equal opportunities for women and protecting women's rights. To achieve Millennium Development Goal 3: promote gender equality and empower women, India needs to intensify and implement its women's empowerment initiatives at the grass-roots level.

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