

Building a Society for All Generations: The Case for a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

A Global Overview of Thinking, Advocacy, and
Strategic Momentum for a UN Convention

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Preface

The world is undergoing an extraordinary demographic transformation. Across every region, the number of older persons is rising at an unprecedented pace. This change is not a future challenge — it is today's reality. It brings with it both extraordinary opportunities and serious obligations: to ensure dignity, security, and rights across the life course.

These rights are not only for those who are already older. A convention will protect people at every stage of life, ensuring that younger generations can look forward to ageing in dignity, that families can care for parents and grandparents as they wish to be treated themselves, and that ageism — whether directed at the young or the old — is addressed as a barrier to equality for all. By taking a lifespan approach, we recognize that the rights of older persons are part of a continuum of rights that must be protected from childhood through the end of life.

This document makes the case for a *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* — a legally binding international treaty that would require Member States to promote and protect the human rights of older persons under international law. Such a convention would not be a meeting or conference, but a formal legal instrument with enforceable obligations. It would also reinforce and complement existing global frameworks, including the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda and labour standards (supporting SDG 8), the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the WHO-led Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030, and the Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities — giving these initiatives normative force and clear accountability mechanisms.

The past decade has seen growing recognition that the rights of older persons are neither adequately protected nor consistently applied within existing international frameworks. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the consequences of systemic neglect, while climate change, conflict, and digital exclusion have continued to highlight the invisibility of older persons in global policy responses.

In this context, *“Building a Society for All Generations: The Case for a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons”* is a timely and powerful contribution. It draws on extensive evidence, legal analysis, and human rights advocacy to make the case for a dedicated international instrument. It moves beyond policy gaps to articulate a vision: one in which older persons are recognized as rights holders — equal in worth, entitled to justice, and essential to sustainable development.

In April 2025, the Human Rights Council took a historic step forward by adopting a resolution to begin drafting a UN convention. This is a moment of genuine opportunity — and responsibility. A strong, inclusive, and enforceable treaty is no longer a distant aspiration. It is within reach.

On behalf of the International Federation on Ageing (IFA), I commend this document to policymakers, advocates, researchers, and all those committed to building a fairer and more inclusive world. May it serve not only as a source of knowledge, but as a call to action.

The future we build must be one where human rights know no age limit.

Gregor Sneddon
Secretary General
International Federation on Ageing (IFA)
April 2025

Executive Summary

The global demographic transition toward ageing societies is accelerating, presenting both remarkable achievements and profound policy challenges. By 2050, the global number of persons aged 65 and over is expected to double to 1.6 billion, representing over 16% of the world's population. This shift reflects decades of success in health, education, and development. However, it also exposes structural inequalities, most notably, widespread ageism, the invisibility of older persons in policymaking, the absence of a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons — a legally binding international instrument, or treaty, that will require governments to protect and promote these rights in law and practice.

Older persons continue to face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including on the basis of age, gender, disability, and socio-economic status. While existing international human rights instruments are universal in theory, they have proven insufficient in practice. Older persons remain underrepresented in treaty bodies, national policies, humanitarian responses, and global development efforts. These normative, protection, and implementation gaps are especially stark in areas such as health, social protection, legal identity, disaster response, digital inclusion, and protection from violence and neglect.

In 2024, the United Nations General Assembly formally concluded the work of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA) an intergovernmental forum established in 2010 to identify legal gaps and consider proposals for a new treaty—and transferred responsibility to the Human Rights Council. On 3 April 2025, the Council adopted by consensus a historic resolution establishing an intergovernmental working group to begin drafting such a convention. Co-sponsored by sixty-eight countries, this breakthrough marked the clearest institutional commitment yet to transforming long-standing dialogue into concrete legal action.

This momentum builds on more than a decade of advocacy, expert analysis, and global mobilization. Civil society organizations—including the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP), HelpAge International, AGE Platform Europe, and the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Committee on Ageing—have played a catalytic role in shaping the call for a convention. National human rights institutions (NHRIs) and United Nations (UN) agencies such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) have provided compelling evidence on the need for legal clarity, visibility, and accountability in the protection of older persons' rights.

A substantial body of documentation now confirms that existing human rights frameworks lack the specificity and coherence needed to address the lived realities of older persons. International studies, including OHCHR's 2021 update and the Global Report on Ageism, highlight how older persons have been persistently overlooked—not only in national systems but in international human rights law itself [14][100].

This paper presents a comprehensive case for a new United Nations convention on the rights of older persons. It outlines the systemic barriers that affect older persons across multiple domains—from healthcare and long-term care to humanitarian emergencies, climate adaptation, and digital access. It also demonstrates how a legally binding instrument will complement existing treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), while closing long-standing legal and policy gaps.

The convention will enshrine the right to non-discrimination on the basis of age, the right to autonomy and participation, the right to protection in emergencies, the right to care and support, and the right to be free from violence, abuse, and neglect. It will establish mechanisms for accountability and create a normative foundation for age-inclusive policymaking across all sectors and at all levels.

The call for a convention is not about creating “new rights.” It is about ensuring that the universal rights to which all persons are entitled are fully realized in older age—without exception or delay. The evidence gathered over the past decade, including through OEWGA, shows that older persons have long been denied this equal recognition.

By uniting fragmented efforts, elevating visibility, and anchoring State obligations in international law, the convention will mark a transformational shift. It will position older persons not as passive recipients of care, but as full rights holders—agents of change, contributors to society, and equal participants in development and governance.

A rights-based approach to ageing is also a rights-based approach to life itself. Adopting the lifespan perspective

reinforces that the rights of older persons are not only the concern of those who are older today. They matter to all generations, including youth, who will one day grow older themselves. A convention on the rights of older persons will help dismantle ageism at every age, build intergenerational solidarity, and ensure that people at every stage of life enjoy their human rights in full. This approach recognizes that the protections we establish now will safeguard the dignity, autonomy, and equality of future generations.

The adoption of a drafting resolution by the Human Rights Council in 2025 represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity. It is now the shared responsibility of Member States, UN agencies, and civil society to ensure that the outcome is a strong, inclusive, and enforceable treaty—one that meets the needs of today's older persons and lays the foundation for a future where no one is left behind.

1. Introduction

The global ageing trend is irreversible and requires comprehensive and rights-based responses. By 2050, more than 1.6 billion people — over 16% of the global population — will be aged 65 or older, with even faster growth among those over 80. This demographic shift is both a triumph of human development and a test of our global commitment to dignity, inclusion, and equity.

This paper argues for the adoption of a *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* — a legally binding international instrument that will require Member States to protect and promote the human rights of older persons in law, policy, and practice. Such a convention is not a meeting or conference, but a formal legal instrument that sets enforceable standards and creates accountability mechanisms. **It will also complement and reinforce existing global frameworks, including the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda and labour standards (advancing SDG 8), the WHO-led Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030, and the Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities — ensuring that these initiatives gain normative force and are linked directly to enforceable human rights obligations.**

The adoption of Resolution A/RES/78/324 in August 2024 by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly marked a major milestone in a much longer journey. This resolution, which transferred the mandate from the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA) to the Human Rights Council, was not the beginning — but the result of more than a decade of sustained intergovernmental debate, expert input, and advocacy by older persons, civil society, and UN bodies. The OEWGA, created in 2010, helped to surface critical legal and institutional gaps, but over time it became evident that these gaps were not merely technical or interpretive. They pointed to deeper structural deficiencies in the international human rights system, which lacked the conceptual tools to address demographic ageing, longevity, and ageism as global human rights challenges [37].

Despite the increasing visibility of older persons in international development dialogues, most existing human rights frameworks fall short in meaningfully addressing the specific needs and lived experiences of older individuals. While international conventions and mechanisms recognize the principle of universality, older persons remain largely invisible in their design, implementation, and monitoring. The lack of legally binding commitments tailored to older persons' rights has resulted in gaps in protection, inconsistent policy frameworks, and limited accountability.

Older age itself is a socially constructed category, varying across cultures and contexts, and influenced by factors such as gender, employment history, and social expectations — not merely a fixed chronological threshold [94]. This diversity of ageing trajectories underscores the importance of moving beyond static definitions toward a human rights framework that is responsive to older persons' lived realities.

The adoption of Resolution A/RES/78/324 in August 2024 by the United Nations General Assembly marked a major milestone in a much longer journey. This resolution, which transferred the mandate from the OEWGA to the Human Rights Council, was not the beginning — but the result of more than a decade of sustained intergovernmental debate, expert input, and advocacy by older persons, civil society, and UN bodies. The OEWGA, created in 2010, helped to surface critical legal and institutional gaps, but over time it became evident that these gaps were not merely technical or interpretive. They pointed to deeper structural deficiencies in the international human rights system, which lacked the conceptual tools to address demographic ageing, longevity, and ageism as global human rights challenges [37].

Beyond identifying “normative” or “implementation” gaps, the OEWGA process revealed deeper conceptual

shortcomings. The existing human rights instruments were largely developed in a period that did not account for demographic ageing as a defining global trend. They were structured around assumptions of a life course that ends earlier, and social categories that did not include ageism as a recognized axis of inequality. As a result, they lack the normative and institutional tools to adequately address longevity, exclusion, and systemic age discrimination. This recognition strengthens the case that a new convention is not simply about filling legal voids — it is about rethinking how international law understands ageing, equality, and rights across the life course.

The call for a convention represents a paradigm shift: from viewing older persons primarily as recipients of social assistance or care, to recognizing them as autonomous rights holders entitled to equal protection under international law. This shift echoes the transformative logic behind the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which recast disability not as a medical issue but as a rights issue. However, older persons were largely invisible during that process, even though many experience disability in older age. A dedicated convention will extend this evolution by affirming that human rights protections must respond to the realities of longevity and age-based exclusion.

This paper builds on that momentum. Drawing on a wide body of evidence — including human rights analyses by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [14], operational guidance from HelpAge International [22–30], policy statements from the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) [13] [18], and intersectional frameworks developed by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and others [35][36] — it presents a comprehensive case for why a dedicated United Nations (UN) convention is not only timely but essential. It highlights key themes such as ageism, gender inequality, humanitarian exclusion, health inequities, and the digital divide, showing how a rights-based framework can anchor policy responses and empower older persons to participate fully in society [92].

Ultimately, this document is not simply a policy proposal — it is a call to action. It challenges Member States, civil society, and international agencies to uphold the foundational human rights principle that dignity has no age limit.

2. A Historic Turning Point – The HRC58 Resolution and the Road Ahead

On April 3, 2025, the Human Rights Council adopted by consensus a landmark resolution establishing a new intergovernmental working group to draft a *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention) (A/HRC/RES/58/13).

This historic decision, co-sponsored by eighty-one countries and supported by thirty-three Council members, reflects the culmination of more than a decade of advocacy, evidence gathering, and multilateral negotiation. It marks the most significant institutional advance in the global campaign for older persons' rights since the creation of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing in 2010 and represents a deliberate shift toward a forum with stronger human rights expertise, greater procedural openness, and deeper engagement from civil society.

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL RESOLUTION A/HRC/RES/58/13

Adopted without a vote on 3 April 2025

The Human Rights Council:

- **Decides** to establish an *intergovernmental working group* open to all Member States to **elaborate proposals for a legally binding international instrument** to promote and protect the human rights of older persons.
- **Requests** that the working group build on existing documentation from the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA), including contributions from UN agencies, National Human Rights Institutions, and civil society.
- **Encourages** the full and effective participation of older persons and their representative organizations.
- **Mandates** the OHCHR to provide substantive and logistical support to the working group.
- **Calls** for the first session of the working group to be held before the end of 2025.

¹ United Nations Human Rights Council, Resolution adopted on 3 April 2025 establishing the intergovernmental working group on the rights of older persons, A/HRC/RES/58/13

Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/%20A/HRC/RES/58/13>

The resolution reflects more than a decade of intergovernmental deliberation and sustained advocacy by civil society, UN experts, national human rights institutions, and Member States. These efforts exposed persistent normative, protection, and implementation gaps—especially in times of crisis—that could not be addressed through existing frameworks. The resolution mandates the Human Rights Council to initiate a formal intergovernmental process to elaborate proposals for an international legal instrument. While not a drafting mandate in the strict sense, it represents a critical political breakthrough that transforms long-standing dialogue into a tangible and time-bound negotiation track.

The decision to move the process from New York to Geneva also reflects a strategic shift. The Human Rights Council offers a more favorable environment due to its procedural openness, stronger human rights expertise among State representatives, and greater space for civil society engagement [94]. This move signals not only institutional progress but also renewed political will.

Civil society's contribution was instrumental in moving the process forward. Organizations such as the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older Persons (GAROP), the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Committee on Ageing in Geneva, and national networks around the world played a crucial role through coordinated advocacy, public campaigns, expert input, and direct engagement with Member States. Their sustained presence—both in Geneva and at the national level—helped build broad support, shape the resolution's content, and ensure that the voices of older persons and their advocates were reflected in the formal intergovernmental process.

The increased participation of national human rights institutions (NHRIs) has also been pivotal in recent years. Their submissions and coordinated interventions strengthened the evidence base and credibility of the campaign, especially during the final OEWGA sessions [94]. This alliance between NHRIs and NGOs has emerged as a central driver of the new momentum.

With this resolution, the international community has sent a strong and united message: the time for a convention is now. The new working group will be supported by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Independent Expert on older persons, and sustained engagement from NGOs and stakeholders worldwide.

This turning point will influence broader agendas, including the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing and the Social Summit in Qatar, offering a powerful opportunity to embed the rights of older persons at the heart of global policy frameworks.

3. The OHCHR's Role, the Independent Expert, and a Priority for Action

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has played a critical role in advancing the recognition of the rights of older persons within the international human rights framework. Through successive analytical studies, thematic reports, and global advocacy, the OHCHR has consistently emphasized that the current patchwork of human rights protections lacks coherence and fails to address the specific vulnerabilities experienced in older age.

In its landmark 2021 update to the 2012 analytical outcome study, the OHCHR clearly outlined three persistent gaps in existing legal instruments:

- Normative gaps (missing or unclear rights specific to older persons)
- Protection gaps (weak enforcement and accountability mechanisms)
- Implementation gaps (lack of political will, resources, and disaggregated data) [14]

The OHCHR has advocated not only for recognition of these shortcomings but also for systemic solutions. Central to this effort has been the role of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, established by the Human Rights Council in 2013. The Independent Expert's mandate includes:

- Assessing the implementation of international standards
- Identifying best practices
- Reporting on emerging challenges
- Providing recommendations to advance the protection of older persons' rights

These recommendations are grounded in evidence from country visits, consultations, and collaborations with Member States, civil society, and older persons themselves.

They have highlighted recurring patterns of exclusion, neglect, and discrimination across all regions and sectors, with disproportionate impacts on older women, persons with disabilities, and those living in poverty [14][35].

The conclusions of the 2021 OHCHR study have been reinforced by further analysis showing that the existing international framework remains conceptually limited and fragmented in its ability to address the realities of older persons [100]. These findings underscore that international mechanisms, while important, were never originally designed to respond to demographic ageing or the social construction of older age, and therefore lack the coherence and prioritization required for effective protection [100].

In 2024, the UN General Assembly took a decisive step by adopting Resolution A/RES/78/324 [37]. This resolution concluded with the deliberations of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing and mandated the Human Rights Council to move the process forward. The resolution reflected growing international recognition that dialogue and review—while necessary—must now evolve into a *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons*.

In response, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has intensified its coordination with human rights treaty bodies, Special Procedures, and mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to ensure that the rights of older persons are integrated across the United Nations (UN) system. However, these efforts remain fragmented and insufficient in the absence of a convention that consolidates standards, clarifies obligations, and mandates robust reporting and accountability.

The notion that existing human rights bodies could simply expand their mandates to cover older persons' rights has been widely questioned. With limited resources, overloaded agendas, and an uneven record on ageing issues, these mechanisms cannot be expected to deliver the systemic transformation that a dedicated treaty could provide [94].

A dedicated United Nations (UN) convention will provide the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)—and the wider UN system—with the legal and institutional tools needed to support implementation, monitor State compliance, and promote accountability. It will move beyond ad hoc engagement and fragmented initiatives by establishing a coherent normative framework that applies across treaty bodies, special procedures, and UN agencies. Existing human rights mechanisms, while important, were never designed to respond to the complexities of demographic ageing or to address the social construction of older age as a human rights issue. Their capacity remains limited by institutional mandates, resource constraints, and a lack of sustained attention. The convention will provide the foundation for coordinated action, clarify State obligations, and offer older persons a meaningful path to claim their rights. It will align with the OHCHR's broader vision of equality and non-discrimination and represent a transformative step toward closing long-standing protection gaps.

4. The Role of Governments: A Call for Leadership and Commitment

The success of a future UN convention on the rights of older persons will depend on the political will and leadership of governments. Member States are the primary duty bearers under international human rights law and have both the authority and responsibility to ensure the full realization of rights for all persons—including older women and men through law, policy, and practice.

To date, several governments have demonstrated leadership by supporting the proposal for a legally binding international instrument. These include countries from diverse regions—developed and developing—whose representatives actively participated in the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA), endorsed civil society recommendations, and championed resolutions at the General Assembly and Human Rights Council. Regional processes, such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Regional Implementation Strategy for the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), have also guided many Member States in mainstreaming ageing into development planning, but these efforts lack legal enforceability and consistency across countries [3]. (United Nations, 2002)

At the national level, governments have implemented a wide variety of policies aimed at supporting older persons, including social pensions, age-friendly urban design, health services, and caregiver support programs. However, these initiatives remain fragmented and are often based on charity or welfare models rather than a rights-based approach. Few Member States systematically recognize older persons as rights holders in domestic law, and even fewer offer legal remedies for age-based discrimination or abuse.

Despite growing acknowledgment of the widespread rights violations affecting older persons, this recognition has

not consistently translated into concrete legal commitments. In many cases, the gap between inclusive rhetoric and meaningful action reflects a lack of institutional prioritization and sustained political will [94].

A *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* will establish a common legal standard, backed by reporting obligations and international oversight, to guide Member States in creating inclusive and accountable systems. It will support the harmonization of national laws and practices, strengthen intergovernmental cooperation, and promote shared learning across borders.

The reluctance of some governments to support a treaty on older persons is particularly notable when contrasted with their active endorsement of recent international legal instruments—such as those on business and human rights, or child protection. This inconsistency suggests that objections may be driven more by political caution than legal coherence [94].

As primary duty bearers under international human rights law, Member States have an obligation not only to promote but to uphold the equal rights of all people, including in older age. Supporting the convention is not merely a gesture of leadership—it is a fulfillment of this obligation, and a necessary step toward addressing structural ageism at all levels.

Moreover, the cost of inaction is significant. As the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) have shown, the absence of a binding framework contributes to persistent protection gaps, inconsistent standards, and missed opportunities for development [13] [14]. Governments that fail to proactively address the rights of older persons face growing risks of inequality, social exclusion, and systemic ageism—challenges that will only deepen as populations age.

On the other hand, Member States that embrace a rights-based approach to ageing stand to gain significantly. Evidence shows that inclusive policies—such as universal social pensions [2], gender-responsive retirement systems [35], and age-sensitive emergency planning [23]—strengthen social cohesion, reduce poverty, and contribute to economic resilience.

By supporting the convention, governments affirm their commitment to equality, non-discrimination, and dignity for all persons across the life course. This leadership is especially critical as global institutions prepare for the post-2030 development agenda and respond to overlapping crises, including climate change, displacement, and pandemics. The convention offers Member States a forward-looking tool to address these challenges with clarity, coherence, and shared responsibility.

5. The Role of United Nations (UN) Programs and Agencies in Advancing the Rights of Older Persons

The United Nations system has long played a vital role in highlighting the situation of older persons and supporting Member States in developing age-inclusive policies. Through research, technical assistance, advocacy, and coordination, various UN agencies have contributed significantly to global awareness and policy dialogue on ageing.

5.1 System-Wide Coordination

At the heart of this effort is the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), particularly its Programme on Ageing, which served as the secretariat to the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing and coordinates inter-agency collaboration. The United Nations Inter-Agency Group on Ageing (IAGA) supports coherence across the system and includes agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), International Labour Organization (ILO), and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Standing Working Group on Ageing also plays a key role in regional policy dialogue and implementation. It coordinates follow-up to the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), supports countries with Road Maps for Mainstreaming Ageing, and co-manages data initiatives such as the Generations and Gender Programme [3][32].

5.2 Policy and Technical Contributions

Several agencies have issued flagship reports and technical guidance relevant to the rights of older persons. For example:

- The World Health Organization (WHO) leads the implementation of the United Nations (UN) Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030), advocating for integrated care, combating ageism, and promoting the functional ability of older women and men [4].
- ILO addresses the extension of social protection floors, occupational safety for older workers, and the right to decent work across the life course [32].
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has developed detailed guidance on the resettlement and protection of older refugees and displaced persons, emphasizing their vulnerabilities and contributions [21].
- OHCHR, in coordination with treaty bodies and Special Procedures, has advanced the human rights dimension of ageing in climate action [31], emergencies [14], and treaty monitoring processes [12].

These agencies have produced detailed field manuals, policy frameworks, and minimum standards, including the Minimum Standards for Age and Disability Inclusion in Humanitarian Action [34] and WHO’s global monitoring frameworks—which provide critical evidence for inclusion and system change.

5.3 Gaps and the Case for a Convention

Despite important contributions, the UN system continues to face limitations in advancing the rights of older persons. Existing frameworks are fragmented, voluntary, and often siloed. Age- and gender-disaggregated data remains inconsistent, and older persons are rarely engaged in programme design or monitoring.

While policy guidance and voluntary instruments such as the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and the United Nations (UN) Principles for Older Persons have aligned with human rights values, they lack the binding legal authority and enforcement mechanisms necessary to ensure accountability or systemic transformation [94].

The fragmentation seen across UN entities is not simply a coordination issue; it stems from the absence of a unified normative framework and a binding mandate that places ageing squarely within the human rights system. A United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons (the convention) will fill this gap by providing the legal foundation for consistent, system-wide engagement, enabling agencies to embed ageing into their work in a coherent and rights-based way.

This lack of institutional coherence and legal accountability has led to missed opportunities for transformative change. As HelpAge International and the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) have noted, older persons are still often viewed through a welfare or vulnerability lens, rather than as rights holders and active participants in society [16][36].

The convention will provide normative clarity and a legal mandate for UN agencies to mainstream ageing in their mandates and operational work. It will encourage consistent use of age-inclusive indicators, promote integration with gender and disability frameworks, and strengthen accountability through reporting mechanisms aligned with treaty body processes.

A legally binding convention will help clarify mandates, enabling UN agencies to integrate ageing explicitly within their human rights, development, and humanitarian frameworks [94]. It will also support system-wide coherence by establishing standards that all agencies can apply consistently, from programme design to monitoring and reporting.

By aligning agency efforts under a unified legal framework, the UN system can move from project-based inclusion to systemic transformation—ensuring that ageing is recognized as a lifelong process and that the rights of older persons are fully embedded across the UN’s sustainable development, human rights, and humanitarian work.

5.4 The Role of the International Labour Organization (ILO)

The International Labour Organization (ILO) plays a unique role within the UN system as the only agency with a constitutional mandate to set international labour standards. These standards, rooted in the Decent Work Agenda, affirm that labour rights are human rights and extend across the life course.

Several ILO instruments are directly relevant to the protection of older persons' rights in employment, social protection, and occupational safety. They include:

- **Convention No. 102** on Minimum Standards of Social Security – establishing essential protections such as income maintenance and health care;
- **Recommendation No. 202** on Social Protection Floors – emphasizing universal access to basic income security and essential health care throughout life;
- **Convention No. 111** on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) – prohibiting discrimination in employment, including on the basis of age;
- **Recommendation No. 162** concerning Older Workers – promoting active ageing policies and continued employment;
- **Conventions Nos. 155 and 187** on Occupational Safety and Health – ensuring safe working environments for workers of all ages;
- **Convention No. 122** on Employment Policy – guaranteeing access to full, productive, and freely chosen employment regardless of age;
- **Convention No. 158** on Termination of Employment – protecting against arbitrary or unjust dismissal, including age-related bias.

These instruments form a robust framework for older persons within the world of work, but they do not address the full spectrum of human rights in older age — particularly those related to health, care, participation, autonomy, and protection outside formal employment.

Recent scholarship has reinforced the importance of explicitly integrating older persons' right to work into national labour policies and global development frameworks. A 2024 special issue of *Public Administration and Policy*, coordinated by Lichia Yiu and colleagues, examines the intersection of ageing, productivity, and socio-economic development. It offers concrete policy recommendations to address barriers to employment in older age, promote lifelong learning, and encourage the active economic participation of older persons beyond retirement [104]. These contributions align with the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and highlight the need for a human rights framework that supports inclusive labour markets across the life course [104].

In a rapidly ageing world, safeguarding the economic rights of older persons—including the rights to work and to engage in entrepreneurship after retirement—is increasingly critical. Longer and healthier life expectancies provide a “longevity bonus” that can enhance both individual well-being and societal resilience. Allowing older adults to remain economically active through part-time work, self-employment, or mentoring helps sustain financial security, life satisfaction, and a sense of purpose. At the same time, it alleviates pressure on pension and healthcare systems, which face unsustainable costs if retirement is equated with inactivity.

Evidence shows that flexible retirement pathways, digital empowerment, and lifelong learning can maintain productivity among older workers, especially in knowledge-intensive sectors. Older adults' expertise and accumulated experience are valuable resources for business innovation, workforce development, and intergenerational knowledge transfer—an essential contribution in economies facing skill shortages.

Policies that encourage entrepreneurship, consultancy, and volunteering among retirees also counteract harmful ageist perceptions, ensuring that societies recognize ageing populations as assets rather than burdens. Moreover, age-friendly workplace practices, digital inclusion strategies, and supportive legal frameworks create enabling environments for older persons to thrive. Upholding these economic rights is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative for sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development.

A United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons will therefore complement existing ILO instruments by filling these gaps, ensuring that rights are protected comprehensively across the life course, and extending international protection to those outside the labour force, in informal employment, or in later life phases where autonomy and participation are paramount.

6. The Role of Civil Society

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including a wide range of NGOs and advocacy coalitions, have played an indispensable role in advancing the recognition and protection of the rights of older persons. Their leadership has been essential in raising awareness, driving policy change, shaping international discourse, and mobilizing support for a dedicated United Nations convention on the rights of older persons.

These organizations operate at both grassroots and global levels—delivering services, conducting research, lobbying for legal reform, promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and combating ageism and discrimination. By engaging with governments, UN bodies, and other stakeholders, civil society ensures that the voices of older persons are heard in policymaking processes and that their dignity and rights are prioritized on the international agenda.

6.1 Advocacy and Global Coordination

Coalitions such as the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) (), comprising over 400 organizations worldwide, have been instrumental in coordinating global advocacy for a UN convention. Through public campaigns, policy submissions, formal statements, and direct engagement with Member States and UN mechanisms, GAROP has positioned the convention as a global imperative [13][16][18].

GAROP's Frequently Asked Questions brief helps demystify the structure and necessity of the convention, while its advocacy materials highlight gaps in the existing human rights system. GAROP has emphasized that mechanisms such as periodic reviews, special procedures, and regional action plans remain insufficient without a legally binding framework [16].

Other leading networks and organizations include:

- HelpAge International
- Age Platform Europe
- International Federation on Ageing (IFA)
- AARP (American Association of Retired Persons)
- International Longevity Center Global Alliance (ILC)
- Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI)
- NGO Committee on Ageing, Geneva
- NGO Committee on Ageing, New York
- NGO Committee on Ageing, Vienna

These organizations have demonstrated remarkable leadership through coordination, research, technical advice, and coalition-building—ensuring older persons' rights are part of global human rights and development agendas.

The civil society movement, while initially less resourced and organized than other rights-based campaigns such as the disability movement, has expanded significantly since 2016. Increased coordination, the revitalization of GAROP, and growing alliances with human rights institutions have strengthened the visibility and credibility of the campaign for a convention [94].

6.2 Grassroots Mobilization and Service Delivery

At the community level, civil society often serves as the first and most responsive point of support for older persons. Local and national NGOs provide essential services including legal aid, food security, cash transfers, shelter, and healthcare, especially in humanitarian settings where government capacity is limited or absent.

Initiatives such as organizations whose members are older persons illustrate how organized older people can promote mutual support, advocacy, and collective action. HelpAge International has documented numerous examples of older persons—particularly women—serving as caregivers, leaders, and agents of change in their communities [24][30].

In humanitarian contexts, CSOs have also been at the forefront of inclusive program design and response, contributing to the development and implementation of standards in:

- Emergency shelter [25]
- Nutrition [27]
- Health [26]

- Protection and psychosocial support [30]

In post-disaster recovery, CSOs have worked with UN agencies and local authorities to ensure older persons are not excluded from planning and rebuilding efforts [22][23][28].

6.3 Research, Monitoring, and Capacity Building

CSOs are also key actors in generating evidence and promoting accountability. Many conduct rights-based assessments, produce shadow reports for UN treaty bodies, and monitor progress on the SDGs. They play a unique role in translating local realities into global advocacy.

Organizations like HelpAge International have produced toolkits—including the Gender Equality Training Toolkit [36] to support capacity building on intersectional approaches. GAROP and others have closely tracked and influenced the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWSGA) process, advocating stronger commitments and amplifying older persons' perspectives in UN negotiations.

In recent years, the participation of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) has become an increasingly important force multiplier. Coordinated interventions and submissions by NHRIs, particularly through GANHRI, have added legitimacy and technical strength to the civil society campaign and reinforced calls for a dedicated instrument [94].

6.4 The Need for a Legal Framework

Despite these impressive contributions, civil society alone cannot secure justice and rights without a formal legal foundation. Many older persons continue to live without legal recourse for discrimination, violence, or exclusion.

A *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* will provide the legal backbone to support and scale up civil society efforts, establish clear obligations for Member States, and create mechanisms for accountability.

Moreover, a convention would legitimize and formalize the role of civil society as a vital partner in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of older persons' rights. It would ensure that older people are not merely recipients of services but active agents in shaping the systems that affect their lives—locally, nationally, and globally. As seen in other treaty processes, the engagement of NGOs and national human rights institutions is essential not only during negotiation but throughout the life of the treaty regime. The convention will secure this participatory space in law and practice.

7. Addressing Concerns: The True Cost of Inaction

As the international community embarks on the process of drafting a *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention), some concerns remain regarding the need, feasibility, or scope of a new instrument. These concerns—ranging from legal redundancy to reporting burdens—should be acknowledged and addressed constructively, not as obstacles, but as part of the process of building a transformative and inclusive legal framework.

Without a coherent and binding **convention**, the global framework for the rights of older persons will remain fragmented. Inequalities will persist, and Member States will lack the normative clarity and accountability needed to deliver on their commitments. Ageism, institutional neglect, and systemic exclusion will continue to undermine dignity, autonomy, and equal participation for millions.

The adoption of the convention represents an opportunity not just to respond to gaps—but to enable a paradigm shift. It will not only consolidate dispersed obligations but reframe ageing in law and policy as a matter of equality, rights, and justice.

7.1 Fragmentation of Existing Frameworks

One of the most frequently cited arguments against a new convention is that older persons are already covered under existing international human rights treaties. While this is true in principle, in practice, older persons are rarely mentioned in treaty body general comments, concluding observations, or Member State reports.

Their specific experiences, needs, and rights violations in later life are often invisible in monitoring, implementation, and jurisprudence [14].

The international human rights system suffers from three interlinked gaps:

- Normative gaps – unclear or missing standards tailored to older persons

- Protection gaps – weak enforcement mechanisms and limited remedies
- Implementation gaps – insufficient prioritization, data, and follow-up [14]

However, these categories are not always distinct. Debates within the OEWGA revealed that what some Member States labelled as “implementation issues” were in fact rooted in normative ambiguity. For example, the inconsistent treatment of palliative care and long-term care rights reflects the absence of codified standards as much as weak enforcement. This recognition has led to a broader understanding: that legal coherence alone is insufficient—what is required is a structural shift in how international law conceives of ageing and human rights [94].

Most existing treaties were drafted without considering the implications of increased longevity, ageism, or the social construction of older age as a category of marginalization. As a result, they lack the conceptual and normative tools to respond adequately. The convention will embed ageing into the global human rights framework and provide the clarity, consistency, and institutional mandate necessary to make rights real in later life [94].

7.2 The Burden of Exclusion

Systemic exclusion of older persons imposes significant societal and economic costs. Age-based discrimination reduces access to employment, education, health care, justice, and public life—especially for older women, persons with disabilities, and those with insecure livelihoods [36]. In emergencies, older persons are often the first left behind [23][25][28].

Social protection systems frequently exclude older adults working in informal sectors or those without contributory histories. Discriminatory age thresholds, paternalistic approaches, and the invisibility of unpaid care work compound disadvantage in old age [2][30].

In the absence of enforceable rights, older persons often have no pathway to claim justice, and Member States are under no obligation to ensure continuity or equity of care, income, or legal identity. These conditions cannot be sustainably addressed without the rights-based foundation that the convention will provide.

7.3 Reporting as a Tool for Progress

Some Member States have expressed concerns about the administrative burden of reporting under a new convention. However, experience from other human rights treaties shows that reporting:

- Promotes internal policy coherence
- Encourages participation from civil society and rights holders
- Helps identify gaps and share promising practices
- Enhances multilateral learning and accountability

The convention will provide a harmonized framework for evaluating progress on ageing-related policies—such as age-friendly health systems, emergency planning, digital access, and long-term care—through a human rights lens.

Reporting, when well supported, becomes a driver of inclusive policy reform and capacity-building—not a punitive mechanism.

7.4 The Price of Delay

Delaying the adoption of a convention perpetuates systemic neglect. Older persons remain largely invisible in national consultations, international reporting, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicators framework [1]. Without legal codification, their contributions go unrecognized, and their rights remain aspirational rather than enforceable.

As population ageing increases, the gaps will only widen. The cost of retrofitting systems later—through emergency reforms or crisis responses—will far exceed the cost of establishing inclusive, anticipatory frameworks now. Investment in a rights-based, age-inclusive policy is not only just—it is efficient and forward-looking.

The notion that improved implementation of existing treaties alone can remedy current shortcomings has proven unpersuasive. Experience from other treaty processes has shown that new conventions can help catalyze reform even when norms exist in theory. In this case, the absence of visibility, coherence, and sustained monitoring mechanisms strongly supports the case for the convention [94].

7.5 A Platform for Solidarity and Sustainable Development

The convention will not only clarify Member States' obligations, it will also offer a platform for intergenerational solidarity, participatory governance, and inclusive development. It will reduce duplication of efforts, provide measurable targets, and support countries in meeting their existing commitments under the SDGs and other international frameworks.

Far from being a bureaucratic exercise, a convention is a transformational tool that will:

- Reinforce accountability and legal coherence
- Empower older persons to claim their rights
- Facilitate global cooperation and shared learning
- Affirm ageing as a shared achievement rather than a burden

8. Addressing Violence, Abuse, and Neglect

Older persons face alarming and pervasive levels of violence, abuse, and neglect—yet these violations remain among the most hidden, underreported, and inadequately addressed human rights issues globally. Abuse can take many forms, including physical, emotional, sexual, and financial harm, as well as abandonment and structural neglect. It occurs in a wide range of settings—within families, communities, institutional care facilities, and humanitarian contexts.

The risk of abuse increases in contexts where older persons face social isolation, discrimination, poverty, or reliance on others without safeguards or oversight. Despite its prevalence, elder abuse is often normalized by harmful ageist stereotypes and overlooked in policy and legal systems. To address it effectively, a fundamental shift is needed: older persons must be recognized not as passive recipients of care, but as rights holders entitled to dignity, safety, and justice.

8.1 Hidden and Underreported Violations

Research by OHCHR and HelpAge International confirms that elder abuse is both widespread and chronically underreported [14][30]. Older persons face numerous barriers to reporting abuse:

- Dependence on caregivers or family members
- Fear of retaliation or institutionalization
- Social stigma and isolation
- Lack of accessible and confidential reporting mechanisms

Cultural norms often minimize or excuse mistreatment, reinforcing silence and enabling impunity. Abuse may be mischaracterized as “discipline,” “stress,” or “family matters,” rather than recognized as violations of human rights.

Older women are especially vulnerable due to the intersection of ageism and sexism. Widowhood, poverty, caregiving burdens, and social invisibility contribute to their heightened risk of gender-based violence and exploitation [16][35]. Older persons with disabilities and those living in long-term care or institutional settings face compounded risks, often without adequate legal safeguards or oversight [21][29].

8.2 Structural and Institutional Dimensions

Violence against older persons is not only a private or interpersonal issue—it is rooted in systemic inequalities and policy gaps. Key contributing factors include:

- Age-discriminatory laws and regulations
- Inaccessible or overburdened justice systems
- Weak oversight of care facilities
- Inadequate standards for long-term care
- Lack of accountability mechanisms

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic exposed and amplified these gaps. In care homes around the world, older persons faced neglect, isolation, and high death rates due to inadequate infection control, understaffing, and discriminatory triage protocols that excluded them from lifesaving treatment based solely on age [14][36].

These patterns of institutional neglect and abandonment—whether in care homes, emergency shelters, or health systems—are not simply policy failures. They reflect a systematic failure to uphold international human rights

obligations. The discriminatory triage protocols, isolation measures without safeguards, and lack of legal remedies reveal not only ageism in practice but the absence of legal protection in principle. Such omissions constitute breaches of Member States' duties to ensure the rights to life, health, dignity, and equal treatment under international law [94].

In humanitarian emergencies, older persons are routinely overlooked in protection systems. Emergency assessments often fail to include elder abuse screening, and older survivors may have no access to shelters, psychosocial support, or legal aid[23][28].

8.3 The Role of a Convention

The convention will help dismantle entrenched attitudes, ensure consistent enforcement, and create a framework for prevention, protection, and redress. It will:

- Define violence, abuse, and neglect of older persons as violations of human rights, not merely social or health concerns
- Establish State obligations to prevent, investigate, and remedy such abuses
- Mandate accountability and enforcement mechanisms at national and international levels
- Require accessible and confidential reporting mechanisms and survivor support services
- Promote age-inclusive protection systems, with special safeguards for older women and persons with disabilities
- Encourage investment in community-based care and home support services as alternatives to institutionalization [25][26]

Critically, the convention will empower older persons themselves to speak out, seek justice, and shape the systems meant to protect them—not as passive recipients of assistance, but as full rights holders with legal standing.

The convention will help dismantle entrenched attitudes that treat violence and neglect in older age as regrettable but tolerable. It will affirm that such abuses are not inevitable social issues, but preventable human rights violations. By establishing enforceable standards, it will create legal obligations for Member States to prevent, investigate, and remedy abuse—and to guarantee access to redress, protection, and survivor-centred services [94].

8.4 Building a Culture of Prevention

Addressing elder abuse requires more than punishment—it requires cultural and structural transformation. The convention will help build this shift by:

- Mandating public awareness campaigns to challenge ageism and change harmful norms
- Supporting training for caregivers, health workers, and police on elder rights and reporting
- Promoting intergenerational education that fosters empathy and solidarity
- Encouraging research and data collection to understand the prevalence and patterns of abuse
- Integrating elder abuse prevention into national human rights plans, disaster risk reduction strategies, and healthcare systems

Prevention is not only about safeguarding individuals today, it is about creating a society in which ageing is embraced and respected.

8.5 A Human Rights Imperative

By anchoring elder protection in a human rights framework, the convention can transform how societies understand and respond to abuse—moving from silence and invisibility to recognition, prevention, justice, and empowerment.

Without such a framework, violence against older persons risks continuing in the shadows—minimized as isolated incidents rather than confronted as systemic injustices [94].

Ensuring protection from violence is not only about meeting the needs of older persons today—it is about building a world where future generations can grow old safely, securely, and with dignity.

9. Health and Care: Promoting Healthy Ageing and Dignified Support

Ensuring access to quality health and care services is essential to upholding the rights, dignity, and autonomy of older persons. While global life expectancy is increasing — a testament to decades of progress in public health and development — this achievement comes with significant challenges. These include the rising prevalence of chronic illnesses, disabilities, mental health needs, and long-term care requirements, particularly among those aged 80 and

above.

Yet, across the world, especially in low- and middle-income countries, older persons remain overlooked in health policies and systems. Ageism is deeply embedded in clinical practice, institutional design, and funding priorities. Too often, older persons are deprioritized for care, excluded from preventive services, and subjected to discriminatory treatment.

9.1 Health Inequities and Ageism in Care

As people age, they are more likely to live with multiple health conditions and functional limitations. However, most health systems are ill-prepared to meet these needs in a rights-based, person-centered, and inclusive way. Ageist stereotypes among healthcare providers may lead to under-treatment, over-medicalization, or denial of services altogether.

Older persons are routinely excluded from services such as:

- Preventive screening programs
- Mental health support services
- Reproductive and sexual health care
- Digital and telehealth systems that require technical literacy or access[14][26]

The COVID-19 pandemic brought these disparities into sharp relief. In many countries, older persons were subject to discriminatory triage protocols, left isolated in care homes, or denied access to intensive care units based solely on age—clear violations of the principle of equal treatment under international human rights law [14][30].

These realities expose the lack of codified protections in international law for health-related rights specific to older age. Rights such as access to long-term care or palliative care remain ambiguously defined or inconsistently interpreted across jurisdictions, leaving many older persons without legal recourse [94].

9.2 Chronic Care as a Distinct Right

Chronic care — the continuous and coordinated treatment of long-term conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory illness, arthritis, and dementia — is an essential but often overlooked dimension of the right to health in older age.

While long-term care systems focus on functional support, and acute health services address immediate illness or injury, chronic care bridges these domains by providing ongoing, preventive, and rehabilitative health services. These services are essential not only for managing illness, but for maintaining functional ability, independence, and quality of life over many years.

In many countries, health systems are still oriented toward acute and hospital-based models of care, leaving chronic conditions underdiagnosed, undertreated, and poorly monitored. Older persons often face fragmented care pathways, repeated hospitalizations, and lack of continuity in treatment. This undermines both health outcomes and system efficiency.

Rights-based chronic care requires integration into primary health care, coordination across providers, and guaranteed access to essential medicines, diagnostics, and assistive technologies. It also requires recognizing the vital role of family caregivers and community health workers, and ensuring they are trained, supported, and linked to formal health systems.

As populations age, the need for chronic care will grow sharply — and the absence of such care will drive inequities, preventable disability, and avoidable mortality.

9.3 The Rising Demand for Long-Term Care

Longer life expectancy, shrinking family sizes, increased urbanization, and women's changing roles in the workforce are reshaping care relationships. The global demand for long-term care (LTC), both formal and informal, is growing rapidly. Yet, most LTC systems remain:

- Severely underfunded
- Unregulated or poorly monitored
- Overly dependent on unpaid caregivers, primarily women [35]

This over-reliance perpetuates gender inequality and undermines the quality, safety, and dignity of care. Older

persons with disabilities, cognitive impairments, or limited mobility are particularly affected when care is institutionalized, delivered without consent, or fails to respect privacy and autonomy [29].

The pandemic further exposed the systemic fragility of LTC systems. Overcrowded facilities, insufficient staffing, poor oversight, and lack of infection control measures led to disproportionately high mortality rates in care homes worldwide.

9.4 Policy Solutions and the Role of a Convention

A comprehensive approach must distinguish between acute care, chronic care, and long-term care, recognizing that chronic care is a fundamental health service in its own right. The convention will require Member States to develop integrated chronic care services — coordinated, continuous, and person-centred — delivered as close to home as possible, in line with WHO recommendations for healthy ageing and primary health care.

There is no shortage of promising frameworks. The World Health Organization promotes healthy ageing through integrated, age-friendly, and person-centred care models [4]. Civil society organizations, including HelpAge International, have developed toolkits for:

- Community-based long-term care
- Participatory planning and monitoring
- Age-inclusive health service design and delivery [23][26][27]

However, without a legally binding international instrument, such as the proposed convention, these tools remain voluntary, fragmented, and unevenly implemented.

The development of a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons (the convention) will help clarify Member States' obligations regarding access to long-term care, prevention of institutional abuse, and the right to age with dignity. The treaty will provide explicit standards for age-inclusive health systems and ensure that services are equitable, respectful, and based on informed consent [94].

It will also help resolve longstanding debates over whether rights such as access to long-term care or palliative care are “new” entitlements or implicit within existing rights like the right to health or the right to be free from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The convention will codify these dimensions explicitly — removing ambiguity, affirming their status as core elements of existing rights, and ensuring their consistent recognition and application across jurisdictions. By doing so, it will prevent the piecemeal interpretation of rights in older age and establish a coherent standard that reflects the lived realities of ageing [94].

The convention will enshrine the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health in older age. It will:

- Mandate the elimination of age-based discrimination in health care and emergency protocols
- Promote universal, affordable, and age-sensitive health coverage
- Require Member States to develop accessible, community-based, and culturally appropriate long-term care systems
- Recognize and support the value of both paid and unpaid care work
- Establish legal safeguards for persons living in institutional care
- Ensure respect for the autonomy and preferences of older persons with disabilities, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) [31][33]

9.5 Dignity, Autonomy, and the Right to Care

Health is not merely the absence of disease, it is about well-being, participation, and the right to make decisions about one's own life. For older persons, the ability to live in their communities, maintain control over their care, and receive respectful support is essential to human dignity.

The convention will affirm these rights, create clear State obligations, and provide the accountability framework needed to transform health and care systems for an ageing world.

9.6 A Moral, Legal, and Developmental Imperative

Addressing the health and care needs of older persons is not only a human rights obligation, but also a practical necessity. Investing in comprehensive and sustainable care systems will empower older persons to live longer, healthier, and more fulfilling lives. It will support families, strengthen communities, and contribute to economic

resilience.

By advancing age-inclusive, gender-responsive, and equitable care, the convention will lay the groundwork for a future where no one is left behind—regardless of age, ability, or circumstance.

10. Disability, Ageing, and the Rights of Older Persons

The intersection of ageing and disability presents profound challenges that demand urgent attention within human rights, social protection, and development frameworks. As people age, the likelihood of acquiring physical, sensory, cognitive, or psychosocial impairments increases significantly. Yet, in both policy and practice, ageing and disability are often addressed in isolation—resulting in fragmented approaches, legal ambiguities, and systemic exclusion.

Older persons with disabilities are among the most marginalized groups in society, facing compounded discrimination based on age, ability, gender, and socio-economic status. Globally, more than 46% of persons aged 60 and older are estimated to live with some form of disability [33].

10.1 Overlapping Exclusions

Older persons with disabilities frequently encounter multiple and intersecting barriers to full participation in society. These include:

- Inaccessible health services and facilities
- Limited access to assistive technologies
- Exclusion from education, employment, housing, and transportation
- Social isolation and stigma
- Inadequate support for independent living
- Discriminatory attitudes from service providers and institutions[14][35]

Despite their growing numbers and needs, older persons are often invisible in disability rights discourse. Disability-focused programs tend to prioritize younger populations or congenital disabilities, while ageing policies often lack a disability lens—failing to address issues like accessibility, supported decision-making, or inclusive communication [33].

These overlapping exclusions reinforce systemic inequalities and erode autonomy, participation, and quality of life.

10.2 Gaps in the Existing Legal Framework

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) affirms the rights of persons with disabilities of all ages. However, older persons are rarely mentioned explicitly in CRPD guidance, and its implementation often focuses on younger demographics.

As a result, the specific challenges of older persons with acquired disabilities—such as stroke survivors, persons with dementia, or those experiencing age-related mobility loss—may fall through the cracks. Moreover, there are significant differences between ageing and disability policy frameworks. While the CRPD promotes personal autonomy and non-discrimination, many national ageing policies still operate under paternalistic or welfare-based models that treat older persons as passive dependents [13][14][18].

This fragmentation reflects a broader conceptual failure to recognize ageing as a phase of life that may include disability, and vice versa. The lack of explicit integration between the two frameworks leads to gaps in protection, programming, and accountability [94].

A dedicated *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention) will bridge these legal and policy gaps, ensuring older persons with disabilities are protected under a unified human rights approach.

10.3 Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement

The global disability rights movement has demonstrated the transformative power of rights-based advocacy, reshaping systems and attitudes. Concepts such as “nothing about us without us,” universal design, and supported decision-making have challenged paternalism and empowered individuals with disabilities.

These principles can and should be applied to ageing. The convention will draw from the CRPD model to:

- Affirm the legal rights of all older persons — including those with cognitive or physical impairments — to make their own decisions and be recognized equally before the law
- Promote accessible environments and inclusive public services

- Ensure equal recognition before the law and access to justice
- Mandate the collection and use of disaggregated data on age and disability
- Combat age-based discrimination alongside ableism [33][34][35]

By embedding these principles into ageing policy, the convention will redefine how society views older persons with disabilities—not as a burden, but as full members of families, communities, and economies.

Older persons with disabilities must no longer be treated as a footnote in either disability or ageing agendas. Their rights must be recognized explicitly, and policies must be coordinated across ministries, sectors, and international frameworks.

The convention will affirm and operationalize the intersectionality of ageing and disability. It will require Member States to:

- Eliminate structural discrimination and institutional barriers
- Guarantee access to independent living, community-based support, and assistive technologies
- Align national frameworks with both CRPD and age-specific obligations
- Ensure equal recognition before the law, legal capacity, and access to justice
- Empower older persons with disabilities to participate fully in political, economic, and social life

Too often, older persons with disabilities have been treated as afterthoughts—excluded from ageing policy because of disability, and from disability frameworks because of age. The convention will not only bridge these silos but correct this systemic oversight. It will move global policy from parallel frameworks to a unified rights-based approach, where ageing and disability are recognized as intersecting and equally important dimensions of human diversity [94].

11. Climate Change and the Rights of Older Persons

Climate change is not only an environmental issue, it is a defining human rights challenge of our time. Its effects are already being felt through rising temperatures, sea level rise, extreme weather events, displacement, and growing insecurity around food, water, and health. These impacts are not distributed equally. Older persons are among those most disproportionately affected, yet they remain largely overlooked in national climate action plans, disaster risk reduction strategies, and global adaptation frameworks.

Despite their vulnerability, older persons are too often treated as passive victims or left behind entirely. This invisibility reflects systemic failures in planning, policy, and resource allocation. It also violates their fundamental rights to life, health, mobility, security, and participation.

Despite these risks, international climate frameworks have yet to meaningfully integrate older persons. Their omission from planning, funding, and monitoring systems perpetuates invisibility and undermines equitable climate justice [94].

11.1 Heightened Vulnerabilities

Older persons are often at increased risk during climate-related hazards due to:

- Limited mobility and accessibility challenges
- Health conditions and unmet care needs
- Geographic or social isolation
- Exclusion from early warning systems and evacuation planning

During disasters such as heatwaves, floods, droughts, hurricanes, and wildfires, older persons are often the least likely to evacuate in time, access shelters, or receive lifesaving information [22][28].

These risks are amplified for older people living in poverty, rural areas, or institutional settings. In many developing countries, older persons rely on fragile ecosystems for their livelihoods (e.g., subsistence farming or fishing), making them highly vulnerable to environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. Institutionalized older adults face additional dangers when facilities lack resilience infrastructure, evacuation plans, or continuity of care[26][29].

Climate change also contributes to displacement and forced migration. Older climate migrants and refugees often face additional challenges due to age-based exclusion from humanitarian services and resettlement planning [21][24].

11.2 Human Rights Implications

The OHCHR's 2021 Analytical Study on Climate Change and the Rights of Older Persons confirms that the rights most at risk from climate change include:

- The right to life and survival
- The right to health and clean water
- The right to food, housing, and adequate living conditions
- The right to mobility and access to emergency services
- The right to cultural identity and participation [31]

These are not isolated consequences—they stem from systemic policy failures, including discriminatory assumptions, insufficient data disaggregation, and the exclusion of older persons from planning and decision-making processes.

Older persons are too often framed as burdens rather than agents of resilience. They are not consulted in climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, or recovery planning—despite their lived experience and valuable contributions to community cohesion and sustainability.

11.3 A Convention as a Tool for Climate Justice

A legally binding *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention) will provide the legal and policy framework to address these gaps. It will require Member States to:

- Integrate age-sensitive measures into national climate action plans
- Collect and use disaggregated data (by age, gender, disability) in all climate assessments
- Ensure accessible and inclusive early warning systems and evacuation protocols
- Guarantee equitable access to shelters, clean water, healthcare, and social protection during climate-related emergencies
- Include older persons in climate governance, planning, implementation, and monitoring
- Recognize older persons' contributions to environmental stewardship, adaptation, and recovery [31][34]

Such a framework will complement existing global climate instruments—such as the Paris Agreement—by grounding adaptation and resilience strategies in international human rights law. It will correct the current legal invisibility of older persons in climate governance and ensure that mitigation, adaptation, and disaster response measures reflect the specific risks and rights of ageing populations. The convention will not only prevent further marginalization but ensure that climate action is inclusive, equitable, and accountable to all generations [94].

11.4 From Vulnerability to Leadership

Older persons are not only among the most at risk—they are also among the most experienced and resourceful. In many Indigenous and rural communities, older people are custodians of traditional ecological knowledge, sustainable resource management, and community risk reduction strategies.

They play vital roles in:

- Local climate adaptation initiatives
- Disaster response and community recovery
- Environmental education and advocacy
- Sustainable agriculture and land use

Recognizing older persons as leaders—as well as rights holders—will shift global discourse from passive protection to active inclusion. In doing so, it will highlight the role of older persons as transmitters of knowledge, agents of social cohesion, and active contributors to resilience and sustainability. The convention will help embed this perspective in law and policy, supporting a vision of climate justice rooted in intergenerational solidarity and full participation [94].

The convention will help shift the paradigm from viewing older persons as vulnerable dependents to recognizing them as resilient leaders and equal stakeholders in building a sustainable and climate-just future.

12. Older Persons in Catastrophes and Emergency Situations

Older persons are among the most vulnerable during catastrophes and emergency situations, yet they are also among the most consistently overlooked. Whether facing natural disasters, armed conflicts, pandemics, or

displacement, older people frequently experience disproportionate risks—but are rarely prioritized in emergency planning, assessments, or recovery frameworks.

Their exclusion reflects a systemic failure to uphold the principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination in humanitarian contexts. A human rights-based approach is urgently needed to ensure that older persons are both protected and empowered in times of crisis.

12.1 Disproportionate Impact

Evidence from past disasters shows that older persons are more likely to die, be injured, or experience severe hardship during emergencies. For example, during Hurricane Katrina in the United States of America, although persons over 75 made up just 6% of the population in New Orleans, they accounted for nearly 50% of fatalities [22]. Similar patterns were observed during Japan’s 2011 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic [14][29].

Risk factors include:

- Inaccessible transportation and built environments
- Gaps in health, cognitive, and psychosocial support
- Exclusion from early warning and evacuation systems
- Lack of outreach to individuals living alone or in remote settings
- Lack of inclusion in preparedness plans and decision-making
- Loss of access to identity documents, health care, and family networks during displacement [21][23]

Older persons with disabilities, older women, and those living in poverty face compounded risks, including exposure to abuse, neglect, and gender-based violence.

These patterns have been consistently documented yet inadequately addressed. Older persons continue to be underrepresented in needs assessments and disaster planning despite being at heightened risk in every phase of a crisis [94].

12.2 Gaps in Humanitarian Response

Despite known vulnerabilities, older persons are still frequently overlooked in needs assessments, evacuation plans, and humanitarian operations. Camp infrastructure, systems for distributing relief items, and communication strategies often fail to meet their needs or ensure their safety [23][25][30].

Many of these systemic shortcomings were exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and are further addressed in Section 8 on violence and neglect. Their recurrence in humanitarian settings points to the need for a binding framework with enforceable standards [94].

While some improvements have been made, most international humanitarian mechanisms still treat older persons as an afterthought. This contributes to institutional ageism — systemic discrimination based on age within institutions — in crisis response. [94].

12.3 Good Practices and Operational Guidance

Despite these challenges, a growing body of practical guidance exists. HelpAge International has developed a comprehensive set of tools for humanitarian actors, including:

- Health Interventions for Older People in Emergencies [26]
- Nutrition Interventions [27]
- Food Security and Livelihoods in Emergencies [24]
- Protection Interventions and Prevention of Abuse [30]
- Guidance on Emergency Shelter Inclusion [25]

In addition, the Minimum Standards for Age and Disability Inclusion in Humanitarian Action offer a cross-sectoral framework for inclusive response planning [34]. These tools emphasize:

- Age- and disability-disaggregated data
- Inclusive communication and community engagement
- Accessibility of shelters, toilets, and information
- Participation of older persons in decision-making
- Safeguards against neglect, abuse, and isolation in institutional and emergency settings

These standards are feasible, field-tested, and essential to uphold older persons' dignity and rights in crises.

While these resources have improved awareness and practice, their voluntary nature means uptake is inconsistent. A legally binding convention would move from guidance to obligation, making inclusive response a requirement rather than an option [94]. It would also strengthen accountability by requiring humanitarian actors and Member States to report on how older persons are included in every stage of disaster risk reduction, response, and recovery.

12.4 Why a Convention Is Needed

While these tools and standards exist, they remain voluntary and inconsistently applied. There is no binding legal obligation for governments or humanitarian actors to include older persons in disaster risk reduction, emergency planning, or response.

A *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention) will fill this gap by:

- Mandating the inclusion of older persons in disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies — strategies to reduce the impact of disasters before they occur — and national emergency plans
- Requiring accessible, age-appropriate shelter, food, water, and health services during crises
- Ensuring legal identity, documentation, and reparations for displaced and affected older persons
- Compelling the training of humanitarian responders to identify and address elder abuse and exclusion
- Affirming the participation and leadership of older persons in resilience-building and community recovery

It will also hold Member States and humanitarian actors accountable for failures to protect the most at-risk populations, as starkly revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic and recent natural disasters. These are not just humanitarian **failures**, they reflect a lack of binding legal obligations to include older persons in emergency systems. The convention will close this gap by making inclusive disaster response a legal requirement, not a discretionary act of goodwill, and by affirming that exclusion in emergencies constitutes a violation of fundamental human rights [94].

12.5 From Protection to Participation

Older persons are not just recipients of assistance — they are leaders, caregivers, and knowledge-holders. Their lived experience, coping strategies, and social capital make them vital to community resilience and long-term recovery.

Including older persons in emergency preparedness planning, response coordination, and monitoring will not only strengthen humanitarian outcomes — it will reaffirm their dignity, autonomy, and right to participate fully in society.

Protecting the rights of older persons in emergencies is both a humanitarian obligation and a practical necessity. By addressing their needs and recognizing their contributions, governments and humanitarian actors will build more resilient, inclusive, and rights-based disaster responses, and support resilience-building — strengthening the ability to withstand and recover from crises — ensuring that no one is left behind when it matters most.

13. Older Persons as Migrants and Refugees

Displacement—whether due to armed conflict, persecution, natural disasters, economic hardship, or climate change—is one of the most pressing global challenges of our time. Yet, in the context of migration and forced displacement, older persons are frequently invisible. Their specific rights, needs, and contributions are often ignored in policies, programming, and humanitarian responses that disproportionately focus on younger populations.

This invisibility has profound consequences: older migrants and refugees face exclusion not only from services, but from the legal, social, and institutional systems designed to protect those displaced by crisis.

13.1 A Growing but Invisible Population

Older persons account for a growing proportion of the displaced global population. According to UNHCR, tens of thousands of older refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are present in humanitarian contexts around the world. However, due to data collection practices that rarely disaggregate by age beyond 60+, their numbers—and experiences—are significantly underreported [21].

In both conflict and disaster settings, many older people are either unable or unwilling to flee, leading to abandonment, separation from families, or even death. For those who do manage to escape, they encounter serious obstacles such as:

- Lack of accessible transportation or evacuation systems
- Loss of essential medications, medical records, and identity documents
- Inadequate shelter and sanitation facilities
- Absence of caregiving support and family networks
- Language, cultural, and technological barriers
- Legal and administrative exclusions, including difficulty registering or receiving benefits [22][23][24][30]
- Older women face heightened risks of gender-based violence, while older men may experience shame or marginalization due to perceived physical decline or diminished social roles [22][30].

13.2 Policy Gaps and Structural Neglect

Although awareness of displacement issues has increased, international protection frameworks often fail to recognize older persons as a distinct group. The 1951 Refugee Convention, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and many regional instruments do not address the compounded vulnerabilities that older displaced persons face over the life course.

- Field assessments and program evaluations have consistently shown that:
- Older persons are excluded from consultations and program design
- Camp infrastructure fails to meet accessibility standards
- Food, water, and non-food item (NFI) distributions are physically inaccessible
- Psychosocial and legal support is rarely tailored to older adults [23][24]
- Older persons face discrimination based on both age and migratory status

Even where legal protections exist in theory, they are often not implemented in practice. UNHCR itself has called for more inclusive approaches to resettlement, documentation, psychosocial support, and long-term care for older refugees [21].

Existing instruments do not provide sufficient normative guidance on how to ensure older persons' rights in contexts of displacement. As a result, age-related risks are often overlooked or inadequately addressed, even in comprehensive protection settings [94].

13.3 Inclusion as a Right, Not a Charity

Older displaced persons are not passive recipients of aid. In many refugee and migrant communities, they are caregivers, educators, community leaders, and custodians of cultural knowledge and social cohesion. Failing to include them is not only a violation of rights—it is a missed opportunity to strengthen resilience and foster inclusive recovery.

A United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons (the convention) will obligate Member States and humanitarian actors to:

- Integrate age-sensitive measures into migration, asylum, and refugee protection systems
- Collect disaggregated data on older migrants and refugees and consult them throughout the program cycle
- Ensure equitable access to shelter, health care, legal services, social protection, and livelihoods
- Prevent and respond to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation
- Support family reunification, mobility aids, and inclusive registration processes

Such measures will help ensure that older displaced persons are protected not through charity, but through enforceable legal commitments grounded in dignity, equality, and justice. The convention will codify Member States' and humanitarian actors' obligations to include older persons in every stage of displacement response—from planning and protection to resettlement and recovery—and will provide mechanisms for monitoring compliance and securing redress where rights are violated [94].

By affirming older persons' rights in displacement, the convention will help move from ad hoc solutions to sustained protection, grounded in dignity and legal accountability [94].

13.4 Bridging Legal Frameworks and Filling Gaps

While instruments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and other human rights treaties provide general protections, they lack the specificity required to address the distinct realities of older age in the context of displacement.

The convention will complement and reinforce these existing instruments. It will clarify how general human

rights principles apply to older persons in migration and displacement, harmonize obligations across overlapping frameworks, and eliminate the gaps that have historically resulted in exclusion by default.

It will also establish clear, binding obligations for Member States to include older persons in refugee protection, statelessness response, and durable solutions. It will create mechanisms for monitoring, accountability, and redress—ensuring that older migrants and refugees can exercise their rights fully, without discrimination on the basis of age [94].

13.5 Inclusion as Justice and Dignity

Recognizing and safeguarding the rights of older migrants and refugees is not only a humanitarian necessity, but also a matter of justice, inclusion, and dignity. Older persons possess extraordinary experience, resilience, and wisdom that can contribute to rebuilding communities and fostering social stability in the aftermath of displacement.

By ensuring their full protection and inclusion, societies stand to benefit from the talents, knowledge, and leadership of all individuals—regardless of age or migratory status.

14. Older Persons and the Digital Divide: Bridging the Gap

The rapid digitalization of society is reshaping nearly every aspect of life—from communication and health care to education, financial services, and public administration. Yet, for millions of older persons around the world, this transformation is leaving them behind. The digital divide is no longer just a technological issue—it is a growing human rights concern, exacerbating inequality, exclusion, and dependency in older age.

Older persons face systemic barriers to digital inclusion that compromise their autonomy, well-being, and ability to participate in economic, social, and civic life. As digital technologies become increasingly central to accessing essential services, bridging this divide is both a policy priority and a legal obligation. Without targeted support, many older persons risk exclusion from employment, services, and social engagement, deepening inequalities. Digital literacy must therefore be recognized as a human right, ensuring equitable access to education, employment, and public services. [104].

14.1 Barriers to Digital Inclusion

Older persons frequently encounter multiple, intersecting barriers when trying to access or use digital tools and services. These include:

- Lack of affordable internet and digital devices
- Low digital literacy and confidence
- Interfaces not designed for older users (e.g., small fonts, complex navigation)
- Ageist assumptions by service providers, designers, and even family members
- Inaccessible authentication methods (e.g., CAPTCHAs, password systems)
- Inadequate technical support and training tailored to older persons' needs [19][20]

These challenges are even more pronounced for older women, persons with disabilities, rural residents, and those with lower incomes or educational attainment. Research consistently shows that age is one of the strongest predictors of digital exclusion—especially in developing countries and marginalized communities.

Digital inaccessibility increasingly leads to the denial of rights such as health care, legal documentation, social protection, and public participation. These exclusions reflect underlying policy and regulatory failures to treat digital access as a fundamental enabler of equality [94].

14.2 Consequences of Exclusion

The implications of digital exclusion are far-reaching. Older persons without digital access may face:

- Greater social isolation and loneliness
- Reduced access to public services and entitlements
- Exclusion from telehealth, online health information, and emergency alerts
- Financial exclusion due to digital-only banking systems
- Inability to participate in lifelong learning, civic engagement, or family connections

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly revealed the real-world consequences of this divide. Many older persons were unable to register for vaccinations, access virtual medical consultations, or use online grocery and delivery services [14][36]. As public and private services increasingly move online, digital access becomes essential for exercising rights and maintaining autonomy.

Yet, most digital transformation strategies fail to include older persons in consultation or design. As a result, age-based exclusion is being replicated and reinforced in the digital sphere, often without recourse or visibility [94].

14.3 Bridging the Gap Through Rights-Based Inclusion

Bridging the digital divide is not simply about expanding connectivity, it requires a rights-based approach that treats digital access as a matter of equality, inclusion, and dignity.

Bridging the digital divide requires multigenerational cooperation, accessible ICT design, and institutional support to build confidence of the older persons through practice and facilitation [105]. By investing in inclusive digital skills training and age-sensitive workplace innovation, societies can empower older adults to remain active contributors, strengthening resilience, equity, and intergenerational solidarity.

A *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention) will create clear obligations for Member States to:

- Promote affordable, accessible digital infrastructure, including broadband and mobile coverage
- Develop user-friendly and age-inclusive technologies, guided by universal design principles
- Implement digital literacy training programs tailored to older persons
- Ensure that public services remain available in offline formats
- Consult older persons in the design, testing, and evaluation of digital platforms and tools
- Protect older persons from online fraud, abuse, and exploitation, particularly those with cognitive impairments or limited digital literacy [19][20][32]

Such provisions would help ensure that older persons are not left behind in digital development, and that ageism does not go unchecked in the evolution of new technologies [94].

14.4 Empowerment Through Inclusion

Older persons are not inherently “unwilling” or “unable” to engage with technology. They are often excluded by design or by neglect. When provided with the right tools, training, and support, older adults have shown great capacity to learn, adapt, and thrive in digital environments.

They use technology to:

- Connect with family and friends
- Access health information and telemedicine
- Manage finances and conduct business
- Contribute to civic life, education, and even innovation

Studies by HelpAge International and UNECE show that empowering older persons through inclusive digital policies benefits not only them, but entire communities, including younger generations who will eventually face the same barriers [19][20][32].

14.5 Inclusion for All Generations

The convention will recognize digital inclusion as a human right and will mandate the structural changes needed to bridge the gap. It will ensure that older persons are not left behind in the digital transformation—and that societies create accessible, age-inclusive technologies by design.

Such a legal framework will help ensure that technology becomes a source of empowerment rather than exclusion—and that digital justice is recognized as an integral part of international human rights accountability. The convention will not only promote access but create binding obligations for Member States to eliminate digital ageism, ensure inclusive design, and protect the dignity, privacy, and autonomy of older persons in an increasingly digitized world [94].

By advancing digital rights for older persons, the convention will help build a society in which inclusion is the norm, not the exception—and where human rights are protected and exercised across all platforms, for people of all ages.

15. Gender Equality and the Rights of Older Persons

The intersection of gender and ageing reveals deep, persistent inequalities that compound over the life course. Older women, in particular, face the cumulative effects of gender-based discrimination, economic marginalization, and social exclusion. These inequalities—rooted in structural barriers—result in disproportionate poverty, limited access to services, and underrepresentation in public life for older women worldwide.

Although international frameworks like CEDAW recognize the rights of women, the specific realities of older women are often overlooked in gender policies, program implementation, and data collection. To achieve full gender equality, it is essential to recognize that gender discrimination does not end in adulthood—it continues, often intensifies, in older age.

15.1 Lifelong Discrimination and Economic Insecurity

From early education to employment, caregiving, and retirement, women face systemic disadvantages that culminate in older age. Throughout their lives, many women:

- Work in informal or low-paid sectors
- Earn less than men due to gender pay gaps
- Take time out of the labor market for caregiving
- Own fewer assets and property
- Lack of access to pensions or social protection benefits

As a result, older women are significantly more likely to live in poverty, especially when widowed or serving as primary caregivers for spouses or grandchildren [2][35]. Women who spent decades in unpaid care roles often receive no formal recognition or financial support in retirement. Universal pension systems, which could provide equity in old age, remain rare or underfunded in many countries [10][24].

Yet many gender equality strategies fail to explicitly include older women or track outcomes beyond working age. This omission leads to policy fragmentation and reinforces exclusion in later life [94].

15.2 The Gendered Experience of Ageing

Gender-based inequalities extend beyond the economic realm. Older women face unique health, caregiving, and social challenges. They often live longer than men—but in poorer health—and are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses, disability, or depression [35].

Yet access to gender-sensitive health services in older age is often inadequate. Reproductive and sexual health services are rarely included in ageing policies. Older women's health needs are frequently dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant, further reinforcing medical ageism and gender bias.

- Older women are also at heightened risk of:
- Gender-based violence (physical, emotional, or financial), especially in caregiving settings or emergencies
- Harmful traditional practices, including accusations of witchcraft, disinheritance, and forced eviction [30] [36]
- Social isolation, especially in widowhood, due to loss of social status and support networks

While older men face their own gendered challenges—such as changing identities post-retirement or underdiagnosed mental health concerns—these are less likely to be recognized or addressed in gender equality policies.

15.3 Gaps in Gender Frameworks and Data

Despite global progress on gender equality, older women remain invisible in many national gender policies, gender mainstreaming efforts, and gender-based data systems. For example:

- Few national gender strategies include older women as a distinct group
- Age-disaggregated data on gender issues often stops at 49 or 59[12][36]
- Monitoring tools and funding allocations rarely account for older women's needs

The 2022 UNDESA report on gender and older people calls for a life-course approach to gender analysis and introduces a new framework for integrating older persons into gender equality agendas [35]. Similarly, HelpAge International's Gender Equality Training Toolkit urges policymakers to design programs that reflect the lived experiences of older women [36]. (HelpAge International, 2020)

Addressing these gaps requires explicit legal recognition of gender in older age. Failing to do so perpetuates lifelong disadvantage and undermines equality commitments under CEDAW, the SDGs, and human rights law more broadly [94].

15.4 The Role of a Convention

A *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention) will fill the current gaps between ageing and gender equality frameworks. It will provide legal clarity and policy direction for addressing the specific rights

and needs of older women and gender-diverse older persons.

The convention will:

- Recognize the cumulative impact of gender-based discrimination over the life course
- Require Member States to adopt gender-sensitive ageing policies in areas such as health, pensions, caregiving, and violence prevention
- Promote the inclusion of older women in political leadership, public decision-making, and advocacy
- Mandate the collection and use of sex- and age-disaggregated data to guide evidence-based interventions
- Affirm the rights of older women to inheritance, housing, bodily autonomy, property, and economic opportunity

Critically, the convention will reframe gender equality as a lifelong right—not something that ends at midlife. It will build on and complement instruments like CEDAW and the CRPD, affirming that age does not diminish the universality of women’s rights. By codifying State obligations across the life course, the convention will require governments to address cumulative discrimination and structural inequality in law and practice. It will empower older women and gender-diverse older persons to claim their rights, challenge stereotypes, and participate fully in shaping the systems that affect their lives.

15.5 A Foundation for Justice and Inclusion

Gender equality in older age is not only a matter of justice—it is a prerequisite for sustainable development, intergenerational solidarity, and inclusive societies. Recognizing and addressing the intersection of gender and ageing is essential to building a future where all people, regardless of age or gender, can live with dignity, security, and full participation.

The convention will affirm that no one is too old to be heard, seen, or protected—and that older women’s rights matter every bit as much as anyone else’s.

By embedding gender throughout its articles, the convention will ensure that older women are not treated as an afterthought in either gender or ageing policies [94].

16. Intergenerational Solidarity and the Lifespan Approach

Ageing is everyone’s future. Ageing is not a phenomenon that affects only today’s older persons — it is a universal experience that will be lived by people of all ages if they survive to older age. A rights-based approach to ageing must therefore adopt a lifespan perspective, recognizing that the protection and fulfilment of human rights at every stage of life contribute to dignity, security, and well-being in older age.

Inequalities accumulate over time. The lifespan approach acknowledges that inequalities often accumulate. Discrimination, poor access to education, precarious work, inadequate health care, and lack of social protection in early and mid-life increase the risk of poverty, dependency, and exclusion in older age. Conversely, the enjoyment of rights throughout life creates the foundations for healthy, active, and engaged ageing.

Why youth should care. Age-related issues are not the concern of older persons alone. Younger people have a direct stake in shaping societies where human rights are protected at every stage of life — for their own futures and for the well-being of their families and communities today.

Engaging youth in the campaign for a convention on the rights of older persons is essential for several reasons:

- Preparing for their own ageing: Ensuring that rights are protected in older age benefits everyone who will one day grow older.
- Supporting their families: Many young people care for parents, grandparents, or other older relatives and have a personal interest in ensuring they are treated with dignity and respect.
- Challenging ageism across generations: Age-based prejudice and discrimination affect both younger and older persons, often rooted in similar stereotypes about capacity, value, and worth.
- Recognizing shared interests: Younger and older persons alike need access to education, decent work, health care, and social protection, and both benefit from inclusive, equitable societies.

Common causes, common rights. A convention on the rights of older persons will help dismantle ageism in all its forms, across all ages, and will create a stronger foundation for intergenerational solidarity. By embedding the lifespan approach in law and policy, Member States can ensure that people at every life stage enjoy their human

rights fully, and that societies are prepared to meet the needs and realize the potential of all generations.

17. Age-Friendly Cities and Communities

The environments in which people live — the built environment, public spaces, housing, transportation systems, and local services — determine whether older persons can participate fully and independently in community life. Since 2007, the *WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities* has engaged over 1,500 municipalities worldwide in redesigning environments to be inclusive for people of all ages [101].

The WHO framework identifies **eight interconnected domains** for age-friendly action [101]:

1. Outdoor spaces and buildings
2. Transportation
3. Housing
4. Social participation
5. Respect and social inclusion
6. Civic participation and employment
7. Communication and information
8. Community support and health services

These domains directly reflect fundamental rights — including the right to mobility, to participate in cultural and public life, to live in adequate housing, and to access health and social services — as recognised in existing human rights instruments.

While the age-friendly cities movement has demonstrated substantial impact in many communities, participation is voluntary, coverage is uneven, and progress often depends on local political will and resources. Many cities still lack binding obligations to ensure accessibility, affordability, and inclusivity in urban planning, public transport, and housing [102].

A *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention) can transform the age-friendly model from good practice into a universal standard by:

- Embedding the right to accessible, safe, and inclusive environments in international law;
- Mandating national frameworks that require local governments to meet minimum standards in each of the eight domains;
- Linking urban design and planning directly to the fulfilment of rights such as mobility, participation, health, and cultural life;
- Strengthening monitoring and accountability for municipal compliance, including through State reporting to treaty bodies;
- Aligning local action with **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)**, ensuring that all urban development strategies are age- and disability-inclusive.

By connecting local age-friendly initiatives to binding national and international commitments, the convention will ensure that all people — regardless of age or ability — can live, work, and thrive in environments that support their rights and well-being across the life course.

18. How a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons Supports the Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits to “leave no one behind.” Yet older persons—particularly those facing multiple forms of disadvantage—remain largely invisible in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite growing recognition of the importance of ageing in development, most SDG indicators and national development strategies fail to meaningfully include older persons. (United Nations, 2002)

A legally binding international convention on the rights of older persons would provide critical support for the full and inclusive realization of the SDGs.

18.1 Contributions of Older Persons to Sustainable Development

Older persons are not only beneficiaries of development—they are drivers of it. They make essential contributions to:

- Economic growth through work, entrepreneurship, caregiving, and consumer spending
- Social cohesion through volunteering, intergenerational solidarity, and family support
- Community resilience in times of crisis, including natural disasters, pandemics, and displacement[4][30]
- Environmental stewardship through sustainable practices and cultural transmission[31]

These contributions, however, are often undervalued or invisible due to ageist assumptions, lack of data, and exclusion from public decision-making.

Development frameworks that fail to account for these roles risk underestimating both the needs and potential of ageing populations. The absence of explicit protections for older persons undermines the integrity of inclusive development [94].

18.2 Gaps in SDG Monitoring and Implementation

Less than one-third of global SDG indicators are disaggregated by age, and even fewer include older age groups beyond 60 or 65[1][12]. Many national development plans, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), and statistical systems fail to measure the inclusion, wellbeing, or rights of older persons.

For example:

- SDG 1 (No Poverty) does not adequately monitor income security in old age
- SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) does not measure geriatric care or long-term care access
- SDG 5 (Gender Equality) rarely includes data or analysis for older women
- SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) lacks a framework to track cumulative disadvantage
- SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities) often excludes age-inclusive infrastructure and transport
- SDG 13 (Climate Action) ignores the specific vulnerabilities of older persons in adaptation and mitigation plans

This invisibility undermines the credibility and impact of SDG efforts and leaves significant populations unprotected and underserved.

Moreover, the voluntary nature of SDG reporting limits accountability. A convention would introduce enforceable obligations that complement SDG targets and elevate them from aspirational to actionable, particularly in relation to older persons [94].

18.3 A Convention as a Tool to Achieve the SDGs

A *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons* (the convention) will provide a legal framework to guide SDG implementation in a way that is inclusive, equitable, and accountable. It will:

- Mandate disaggregated data collection by age and sex
- Require State reporting and independent monitoring
- Establish minimum standards for inclusion in health, social protection, education, and public participation
- Promote intergenerational solidarity and recognition of older persons' contributions
- Align ageing policy with other international treaties, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Paris Agreement

The Convention will also strengthen progress toward **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)** and **SDG 1 (No Poverty)** by reinforcing and complementing the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and its related instruments. These include conventions on minimum standards of social security, employment policy, non-discrimination in employment and occupation, termination of employment, and occupational safety and health, as well as recommendations on social protection floors and older workers. Together, these ILO standards form a strong labour rights foundation that the Convention will extend and connect to the broader spectrum of human rights in older age — including health, care, participation, and autonomy — ensuring comprehensive protection across the life course.

The Convention will also support the implementation of the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030, coordinated by the World Health Organization [103]. The Decade calls for concerted global action in four areas: combating ageism; creating age-friendly environments; delivering integrated care; and providing access to long-term care. By embedding these priorities in a legally binding framework, the Convention will give them normative force, require national reporting on progress, and ensure that healthy ageing is recognized not only as a policy goal but as a human right throughout the life course.

As the world moves toward the post-2030 agenda, the convention will ensure that older persons are no longer an afterthought in development, but an integral part of planning, implementation, and evaluation.

By codifying rights-based development for older persons, the convention will support the realization of all 17 SDGs and help governments operationalize their commitment to inclusion across the life course [94].

18.4 Making Visibility Meaningful

The commitment to “leave no one behind” must be more than rhetorical. The convention will provide the legal foundation and institutional mechanisms to translate this promise into enforceable rights for older persons. It will help Member States move beyond voluntary pledges to binding obligations—and create a normative framework in which older persons are counted, consulted, respected, and protected across all pillars of sustainable development. Without such a treaty, the SDGs risk remaining aspirational for millions of older people who still lack access to justice, data visibility, or meaningful accountability [94].

19. Conclusion

The global demographic transition toward ageing societies is irreversible, profound, and accelerating. It stands as one of humanity’s greatest triumphs — a testament to decades of investment in health, education, development, and rights. Yet it simultaneously exposes the persistent structural inequalities and policy blind spots that undermine the dignity, autonomy, and participation of millions of older women and men around the world.

Despite growing visibility and voluntary initiatives, older persons continue to face systemic exclusion and discrimination across virtually every sector of public life. They are often invisible in development planning, marginalized in emergency responses, underserved in healthcare and long-term care, excluded from digital innovation, overlooked in migration policies, and disproportionately affected by climate change and humanitarian crises. Older women and older persons with disabilities experience compounded disadvantages that reflect intersectional layers of exclusion throughout the life course.

While existing human rights instruments are universal in principle, in practice they have failed to provide the necessary protection for older persons. Numerous analyses — including by the OHCHR, GAROP, HelpAge International, UNECE, and UNDESA — document pervasive normative gaps (missing or unclear rights), protection gaps (lack of enforcement and remedies), and implementation gaps (insufficient political will, resources, and data).

This paper has demonstrated that voluntary guidelines, soft law instruments, sector-specific frameworks, and fragmented approaches have not sufficed to deliver justice, dignity, and equality for older persons. **Only a legally binding United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons (the convention)** will bring coherence, consistency, and enforceability to the global effort to recognize and safeguard the rights of older persons.

The historic adoption of the Human Rights Council resolution on 3 April 2025 — establishing an intergovernmental working group to begin drafting the convention — marks a turning point in the international community’s engagement with ageing. It is the result of decades of patient advocacy by civil society, the leadership of a growing number of Member States, and the persistence of older persons themselves.

The adoption of the convention will serve several vital and interconnected purposes:

- Recognition of older persons as rights holders — shifting from a charity-based approach to a rights-based approach, affirming dignity and autonomy at all stages of life
- Clarification and consolidation of Member State obligations — providing clear guidance for policy design, legal reform, and accountability
- Strengthening of national and international accountability frameworks — ensuring that monitoring, reporting, and peer review systems integrate older persons’ rights systematically
- Promotion of inclusive development — contributing directly to the achievement of the SDGs, particularly

through age-sensitive poverty reduction, health, education, urban planning, and disaster resilience strategies

- Enhancement of intergenerational solidarity — recognizing ageing as a universal experience that binds societies together, not as a source of division

The convention will address key substantive areas identified throughout this document:

- The right to the highest attainable standard of health, including access to long-term care
- The right to protection against violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation
- The right to non-discrimination on the basis of age, gender, disability, or other status
- The right to participation in decision-making at all levels
- The right to social protection, adequate standards of living, and financial security
- The right to digital inclusion and access to information and technology
- The right to protection in situations of disaster, conflict, migration, and climate emergency
- The right to autonomy, independent living, and choice in care and support arrangements

The convention will not duplicate existing frameworks but complement and strengthen them — bridging the gaps left by instruments such as the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**, the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**, the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**, and others. It will ensure that older persons are explicitly and systematically included in the global human rights architecture.

Moreover, the convention will reflect and reinforce the lessons learned from other human rights movements — notably the disability rights movement — emphasizing principles of autonomy, participation, intersectionality, universal design, and “nothing about us without us.”

What distinguishes the campaign for older persons’ rights is the level of evidence and advocacy that has already been produced — far exceeding the burden placed on other groups when similar conventions were adopted. This disparity reflects not only institutional inertia but a deeper form of ageism within international lawmaking [94].

The case for a convention is also a case for protecting rights across the life course. By embedding the lifespan approach into international law, it will strengthen solidarity between generations, challenge ageism in all its forms, and ensure that the protections we secure today will benefit every generation — including those who are young now. This is not just about today’s older persons; it is about creating a society in which human rights are protected and fulfilled from childhood to older age, for all people, everywhere.

The demand for the convention is not a special plea for a minority group — it is a call for justice, inclusion, and equality across the lifespan. In the 21st century, advancing human rights must mean embracing all stages of human life, including older age [94].

The path ahead will require leadership, vision, and courage. Member States must now engage in the drafting process with ambition and commitment, ensuring that the treaty reflects the lived realities, needs, and aspirations of older persons in all their diversity. Civil society will continue to serve as a catalyst, watchdog, and partner throughout the negotiations and beyond. UN agencies will mainstream the rights of older persons across their programs, operations, and normative frameworks.

The success of this process will hinge not only on technical excellence but on political will — the will to prioritize the rights of older persons not as a marginal issue, but as central to the human rights agenda of the 21st century.

The stakes are high. As ageing populations grow larger and more diverse, the cost of inaction will be measured not only in lost lives, increased inequalities, and missed development opportunities but also in the erosion of the very principles of equality, dignity, and solidarity that underpin the United Nations Charter.

Conversely, the adoption of a strong, inclusive, and enforceable **convention** will mark a transformational advance — a once-in-a-generation achievement capable of reshaping societies for the better.

It will help build a future in which older persons live not in fear or invisibility, but with dignity, security, autonomy, and pride. A future where ageing is celebrated as a triumph of human progress, and where human rights know no

age limit.

The time to act is not tomorrow — it is today.

A convention on the rights of older persons is not just about older persons — it is about the kind of societies we aspire to build for all generations. The path to this moment has been longer and more contested than for many other human rights instruments — not because the case is weaker, but because ageism itself has shaped the thresholds of legitimacy. Older persons have had to prove what others were presumed to deserve: that they are equal in dignity, equal in rights, and equally entitled to international protection.

The adoption of the convention will mark a milestone in the maturation of the international human rights system. It will affirm that human rights do not diminish with age — and that equality, participation, and autonomy must apply across the life course. It will bring older persons from the margins to the centre of legal and political attention, and in doing so, it will help realize the promise of universality that underpins the entire human rights project.

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- **AARP** – American Association of Retired Persons
- **ADCAP** – Age and Disability Capacity Programme
- **AGE** – AGE Platform Europe
- **AI** – Artificial Intelligence
- **CEDAW** – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- **CONF** – United Nations Conference (appears in UN document codes)
- **COVID-19** – Coronavirus Disease 2019
- **CRPD** – Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- **CTU** – Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Communications Technology Update (in citation context)
- **DESA** – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (*see UNDESA*)
- **DRR** – Disaster Risk Reduction
- **ECOSOC** – United Nations Economic and Social Council
- **EU** – European Union
- **GANHRI** – Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions
- **GAROP** – Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People
- **HLPF** – High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
- **HLS** – High-Level Segment
- **HRC** – Human Rights Council
- **IAGA** – United Nations Inter-Agency Group on Ageing
- **ICCPR** – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- **ICESCR** – International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- **IEEE** – Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers
- **IFA** – International Federation on Ageing
- **ILC** – International Longevity Centre Global Alliance
- **ILO** – International Labour Organization
- **IMF** – International Monetary Fund
- **IMSERSO** – Instituto de Mayores y Servicios Sociales (Spain)
- **LTC** – Long-Term Care
- **MIPAA** – Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing
- **NFI** – Non-Food Items
- **NGO** – Non-Governmental Organization
- **NHRI** – National Human Rights Institution
- **OEWGA** – Open-ended Working Group on Ageing
- **OHCHR** – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
- **PAU** – Programme on Ageing Unit
- **RES** – Resolution (as in United Nations General Assembly or Human Rights Council resolution codes)
- **SDG** – Sustainable Development Goal
- **SEA** – South-East Asia (*in SUNI-SEA project context*)

- **SUNI-SEA** – Scaling-Up NCD Interventions in South-East Asia project
- **UDHR** – Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- **UK** – United Kingdom
- **UN** – United Nations
- **UNDESA** – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
- **UNDP** – United Nations Development Programme
- **UNECE** – United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
- **UNFPA** – United Nations Population Fund
- **UNHCR** – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- **UPR** – Universal Periodic Review
- **WHO** – World Health Organization



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