



HelpAge International Submission on Social Inclusion

13th Working Session of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing, 2023

Introduction

Older people must be part of the growing discussion on their human rights. To this end, in November 2022 HelpAge International network members and country offices carried out individual interviews with 50 older women and men in 5 countries¹ on the rights to be discussed at the 13th Session of the UN OEWG. This submission presents the issues they raised and uses their own words.

Social inclusion is about creating an inclusive society that leaves no one behind. In older age, social inclusion depends on the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms. In practice, however, many older people face significant barriers that limit their ability to participate, to have equal access to resources and services, and to have their voices heard.

We asked older people how they experience barriers in the realisation of social inclusion in three specific domains that have not been discussed yet within the OEWG: social relations, digital inclusion and age-friendly spaces.² The findings are intended to capture the views of the older people interviewed and are not intended to be representative of the population of older people as a whole.

Social relations

Although many older people consider themselves to have “good” (high quality) social connections, they find that their relationships with people younger than them can be challenging. This is due to ageist behaviour and attitudes towards older people.

“Yes, there are times I feel lonely, like in this village, you are always isolated in the community by the younger people, people your age, and they talk about us negatively, and sometimes say inappropriate things about us older people. The younger people lack respect for us by saying we are witches.” 69-year-old woman, Kenya

“Yes, my relationships are great. I have relationships as old as 20 years and we’re all close in age. As for my family, the age difference can result in constant clashes and disagreements.” 65-year-old man, Jordan

¹ Colombia, Jordan, Kenya, Philippines and Spain.

² Social inclusion for older people closely relates to access to resources (income, employment, land, housing, etc); access to goods and services, (healthcare, education, etc); equality and freedom from ageism and discrimination; participation in societal relationships and activities. J Warburton et al., ‘Social inclusion in an ageing world: introduction to the special issue’, *Ageing & Society*, vol. 33, 2013, p.3.

Like all other age groups, older people enjoy a wide range of different social and leisure activities. These social interactions have a positive effect on their physical and mental health. But a lack of availability and affordability limits older people's participation.

"In my experience, it's really fun, it gives me relaxation, and I think these kinds of activities prolong the life of a senior." 79-year-old woman, Philippines

"There are not many social activities where I live. If there were more, I will participate more." 67-year-old woman, Spain

"But when everything was interrupted due to COVID-19, it was like falling off a cliff. There are no more activities, and the lack of money prevents us from participating in them." 73-year-old man, Jordan

Digital inclusion

Many older people do not have access to digital devices or the internet. They mainly rely on younger family members for support. While many are interested in using digital devices and social media, others prefer to stay offline.

"There are others who have access, but don't have help because their children or their grandchildren work. I don't think that age is an obstacle, but society brings those obstacles." 75-year-old man, Colombia

"I learned using laptops when I was still working. But upon retirement, I already turned over the laptop. I think I lost the knowledge on using it, too. I don't even know how to use these newer phones, the touchscreen ones." 71-year-old woman, Philippines

"I have a phone and access to the internet, but I don't use them a lot. I prefer to read a book or a newspaper." 77-year-old man, Jordan

Age-friendly environment

When asked about their living environment, older people report that their mobility is limited by inaccessible and/or unaffordable public transportation. Some also say that they feel unsafe when they leave their home.

"I'd like to see a football match in the stadium, but I can't due to the long queues and the distance from the parking lot. It is not age-friendly." 66-year-old man, Jordan

"The city is a long way from being safe or age-friendly, because roads are in poor condition, which means that accidents could be caused and affect older people." 82-year-old man, Colombia

"People with physical limitations find public transport very difficult due to the difficulties in accessibility. Going up to the train station, for example, is complicated." 64-year-old woman, Spain

Lack of income and financial resources

A cross-cutting barrier that older people face is a lack of income and financial resources. In their experience this affects their social relationships, limits their opportunities to engage in

social and leisure activities, prevents them from using public transportation and from living in a place or house of their choice.

“Things are tight, so we don’t see family as we used to. I’d like to go to a gym, but I can’t afford it. Life is much more expensive now. I retired in 2008, and my pension is decreasing, and prices are going up. Even street food has become for rich people. Life has become so difficult.” 66-year-old man, Jordan

“There are many people as old as me, or even younger than me, pensioners who don’t have access to digital devices so they can’t practice. They don’t have access for economic reasons.” 75-year-old man, Colombia

“I stay in my house with my grandchildren. The environment is not very conducive. The room is small and I have grandchildren who are teenagers now. It becomes difficult. This I just do because I cannot afford another place.” 65-year-old woman, Kenya

International legal framework

Although there is no right to social inclusion as such in international human rights law, they are closely interrelated. Achieving social inclusion depends on achieving the full range of human rights.³ Dismantling structural inequality and ageism are important prerequisites for social inclusion of older people.

The right to equality and non-discrimination is guaranteed in various human rights treaties, such as articles 2(1) and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), article 2(2) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and article 5 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The right to participate in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport is guaranteed under article 15 of the ICESCR and article 30 of the CRPD. The principle of “full and effective participation and inclusion in society” is provided under article 3 of the CRPD. The CRPD also provides for the right to awareness raising (article 8), and the right to independent living and being included in the community⁴ (article 19).

These rights have not been specifically applied to older people in the existing international human rights framework. This leads to a lack of clear guidance on States’ obligations and a lack of implementation in practice.⁵ They need to be included in a new convention on the rights of older people.

A convention would foster key aspects of social inclusion by clarifying how fundamental rights and freedoms apply to older people and the specific obligations States have to respect, promote and fulfil our rights in older age. A comprehensive legal instrument can therefore

³ Taket, A, ‘Social Inclusion and human rights’ in Liamputtong, P (ed), *Handbook of social inclusion*, Springer, 2022.

⁴ “Being included in the community includes living a full social life and having access to all services offered to the public and to support services offered to persons with disabilities to enable them to be fully included and participate in all spheres of social life.” Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ‘General comment No. 5 (2017) on living independently and

being included in the community’, para. 16b, CRPD/C/GC/5.

⁵ Also see HelpAge International, [Advancing equality for older people](#), London, HelpAge International, 2021.

act as a catalyst for the integration of a rights-based approach to ageing in the development and implementation of global and national policies on development and social inclusion.

*A full report of the consultation findings will be submitted to the OEWG in advance of the 13th Session. For further information contact Marijke De Pauw, HelpAge International
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