

**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women  
Forty-fourth session  
20 July to 7 August 2009**

**Informal meeting with entities of the UN system and other stakeholders on a general  
recommendation on 'older women and protection of their human rights'  
21 July 2009**

**Presentation by  
Carolyn Hannan, Director Division for the Advancement of Women  
on behalf of  
The Department of Economic and Social Affairs**

Madame Chairperson,  
Distinguished experts,  
Colleagues and friends

It is an honour for me to address the Committee on behalf of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in relation to the Committee's work towards a general recommendation on older women and protection of their human rights. Three of DESA's Divisions have contributed to today's presentation: the Population Division, which has a long tradition of studying population ageing, including by estimating and projecting the size and characteristics of ageing; the Division for Social Policy and Development, which promotes and supports implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing; and the Division for the Advancement of Women, whose responsibilities include support for the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and its follow-up.

The gender dimensions of ageing are now well recognized. Looking at the demographic aspects of ageing, women constitute a majority of the older population. (Since the time of the First World Assembly on Ageing in 1980, the age of 60 is commonly used to define an "older person".) At the global level, there are 120 womt oveonour al ryMCI

women and men. Protection and promotion of the rights of older women therefore calls for a life cycle approach, and targeted policies, programmes and services to prevent, and respond to, discrimination against older women.

We suggest that the Committee consider the following issues in its general recommendation on older women and the protection of their human rights:

- The usefulness of framing the general recommendation from a life-cycle approach that recognizes the impact of discrimination against women throughout their lives on their old age;
- The scope and extent of discrimination and inequality that women encounter throughout their working lives, as well as their lower levels of education which result in older women's greater poverty, ill-health, and lack of or limited access to social security and social protection;
- The persistence of de jure discrimination, including in regard to property and ownership rights, and marriage and family relations, and the impact of such discrimination on women as they reach old age;
- The prevalence of violence against women, which persists in women's old age, and is further exacerbated by age-specific forms of maltreatment and abuse;
- The implications of negative stereotypes, prejudices and practices against women which are perpetuated and compounded in women's old age, and put older women at particular risk of poverty, violence and ill-health; and
- The increased risk of discrimination and violation of their human rights faced by certain groups of older women, including widows, women living in poverty, women in minority groups, or women in rural or remote areas, and in difficult circumstances, such as women in conflict and post-conflict situations, including refugee or displaced women.

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The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) addresses these issues in research and policy analysis, and its support to intergovernmental processes.

The Political Declaration and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, adopted by the Second World Assembly on Ageing held in Madrid, Spain in 2002, recognized that old age is a period of particular vulnerability for women. It put forward a series of policy recommendations aimed at addressing the challenges and opportunities of population ageing in the twenty-first century and at achieving the goal of a society for all ages. The recommendations of the Madrid Plan of Action are organized in three pri194 Tcd 0.02s, organi.



Women spend a larger proportion of their lives in poor health than men. Their health problems in old age are rooted in the discrimination they face earlier in life. When women have less access to nutrition and health care in their younger years, they face an increased risk of chronic illness in old age. Their access to services, especially in rural

## Annex

### Background on population ageing and older women

Prepared by: Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs

The highlights below have been drawn from recent and ongoing work in the Population Division/DESA.

#### *A. Ageing populations<sup>1</sup>*

In the more developed regions in 2009, 21 per cent of the population is already aged 60 years or over and that proportion is projected to reach 33 per cent in 2050. In developed countries as a whole, the number of older

*C. Nearly everywhere, women are more likely than men to survive to older ages*

At rates of mortality in the current period (2005-2010), 79 per cent of the world's newborn girls and 73 per cent of boys can expect to live to age 60. Women surviving to age 60 could then expect to live for an addi

At the global level, an estimated 62 per cent of older people are currently married and living with a spouse. There are marked differences between men and women. Among older women, 48 per cent live with a spouse, while among older men the proportion living with a spouse reaches 80 per cent. On average, there are only 31 older men *without* a spouse per 100 older women in the same situation.

The general pattern whereby older men are more likely to have a spouse than older women is observed in all countries, although the size of this gender gap varies. For the group of least developed countries, the proportion of older men who are married, 85 per cent, is higher than at the world level, while the corresponding proportion for women, 39 per cent, is lower than the world average.

*E. About one out of every seven older persons lives alone*

Older persons living alone constitute a group that is of natural social and policy concern. Those living alone are more likely to need outside assistance in the case of illness or disability, are at greater risk of social isolation and, especially older women, can face higher risks of poverty. For the world as a whole, the proportion of the population aged 60 or over who live alone is estimated to be 14 per cent.

*Older women are usually more likely than older men to live alone*

More older women than older men live alone in most countries because older women are more likely to be widowed and hence less likely to be living with a spouse. At the global level, the average proportion of women aged 60 or over living alone is about 20 per cent, while only 8 per cent of older men live alone. Gender differences are significantly larger in the more developed regions, where levels of solitary living are relatively higher than in the less developed regions. In the more developed regions, around one third (32 per cent) of older women live alone, as compared to 13 per cent of older men. In the less developed regions, 9 per cent of older women and 5 per cent of older men live by themselves. The levels of solitary living are so much lower in the less developed than in the more developed regions reflect the fact that older persons in less developed countries are more likely to live with children or other relatives.