

# women 2000



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## INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) concluded: "In no society do women enjoy the same opportunities as men." In 2000, progress in the implementation of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was reviewed by the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". The event noted that "even though significant positive developments can be identified, barriers remain and there is still need to further implement the goals and commitments made in Beijing".<sup>1</sup>

Gender relations structure the entire life cycle, from birth to old age, influencing access to resources and opportunities and shaping life choices at every stage. The relevance of gender is both ongoing and cumulative—the different circumstances that shape the lives of women and men in old age are the

outcome of the many different opportunities, challenges and constraints that have gone before. Good health, economic security, adequate housing—these are fundamentals of ageing with dignity; yet achieving them depends on decisions and choices only partly determined by each individual.

The impact of gender differences and inequalities in education and employment opportunities increases through every stage of an individual life, hitting hardest in old age. As a result, older women are more likely than older men to be poor. Men and women suffer different health problems as they age, and women's lack of access to adequate care is sharpened by their higher levels of poverty. As United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated in March 1999, during the International Year of Older Persons: "Women comprise the majority of older persons in all but a few countries. They are more likely than men to be poorer in old age, and more likely to face discrimination. Moreover, their contributions as caregivers—for exam-

ple, to grandchildren orphaned by HIV/AIDS—are often overlooked and underpaid, if paid at all."<sup>2</sup>

Healthy ageing also depends upon women's and men's attitudes towards themselves and what they are entitled to as parents, community elders or citizens. In most societies, this too is shaped by gender relations: whether people think of themselves as useless burdens or valuable assets reflects social attitudes towards the roles of women and men, what they can give to society and what they deserve in return. Attitudes, like opportunities, are also shaped by many other dimensions that define identity in different societies—including race and ethnicity, religion, disability and, especially, class and wealth.

Media magnify these differences. Western ideals, often geared to marketing concerns, penetrate cultures around the globe, glorifying youth and distorting age. Stereotypes of all ages are reflected back to audiences as reality, spreading the idea of older women, especially rural women, as a burden on a younger generation.

### Gender

Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. They are context/time-specific and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most soci-

eties, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader sociocultural context. Other important criteria for sociocultural analysis include class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age.

Source: Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, United Nations, August 2001.

### Policy implications

As the population age structure shifts, the population of older people will increase in proportion to that of younger people, especially those of "working age". This shift has profound policy implications—for pension and income support, for job creation and employment, for health- and elder-care systems and for economic growth and development in every country.

Policies to address these issues, if they are to be effective, must be informed by an understanding that women and men experience old age very differently. Older women, especially if they are poor or disabled, immigrants or members of a non-majority racial, ethnic or religious group, commonly lack the resources and influence that determine social policies.

Government agencies and legislatures that carry out the research and analyses on which laws and policies are developed thus need to understand and address the realities of both older women's and men's lives.

Over the past two decades, ageing has surfaced as a policy issue in various global forums. In addition to those devoted to ageing or population issues, including the First World Assembly on Ageing in 1982 and the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, ageing has been addressed at United Nations conferences on women, social development and housing.<sup>3</sup> Its importance was reaffirmed most recently at the special session of the General Assembly in June 2000 to review implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.<sup>4</sup> Thus as the world prepares for the Second World Assembly on Ageing to be held in Madrid in April 2002, there is increasing awareness that ageing is also a gender issue, and that policies, programmes and strategies must be responsive to gender dimensions.

## AN AGEING WORLD

Population ageing is a worldwide phenomenon, owing first to declining fertility rates and secondly to increased life expectancy. In every region of the world, women are having fewer children than three decades ago, when the overall trend in population growth started to slow down. In the early 1970s, the total fertility rate worldwide was estimated at 4.5 children for each woman, compared with 2.7 today.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, advances in nutrition, medicine and lifestyle have resulted in people living longer. Life expectancy worldwide increased from 45 years in 1945 to 69 years in 2000 and is projected to reach 78 years by 2050.<sup>6</sup> This makes older people the fastest-

### Myths and facts on gender and ageing

**Myth:** Ageing is not a concern for developing countries, since most older people live in industrialized countries.

**Reality:** Although the proportion of older people to younger ones is currently higher in developed countries, the demographics of ageing are such that, by 2025, 75 per cent of the 1.2 billion people over 60 years old will live in developing countries.

**Myth:** Older women in developing countries are respected and cared for within traditional extended families.

**Reality:** Extended families are declining in many parts of the developing world, as young people move to the cities and establish nuclear families. Even where extended families are still the norm, they are showing the strains of longer life expectancy and greater care burdens. As a result, many older women are living alone, in all parts of the world.

**Myth:** Older women are likely to be weak, frail or disabled as a direct result of the ageing process.

**Reality:** The highest toll on older bodies occurs as a result of poverty over many years, not ageing itself. Conditions such as anaemia or osteoporosis can disable men and women, but can be avoided with good nutrition and proper exercise. With access to health care throughout the life cycle, women can stay healthy and active into very old age.

**Myth:** Older women are unproductive and a burden on communities and societies, especially on the younger working-age population.

**Reality:** Most women—particularly in countries that lack comprehensive and equitable pension systems—continue to work well into old age, supporting themselves, their families, and often their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In addition to the millions of women who remain in the paid workforce, there are millions more who are unpaid workers—family and community leaders, caregivers, advisers, teachers, volunteers. In both paid and unpaid work, their contribution to society and the economy is vital.

Sources: HelpAge International, [www.helpage.org/info/myths.html](http://www.helpage.org/info/myths.html); World Bank, *Averting the Old Age Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

growing population group: by 2050, the number of people over 60 will more than triple, from 606 million today to nearly 2 billion. Nearly one in four persons will be over 60 years old and, for the first time in history, they will outnumber children. The increase will be even more marked

among the oldest old, people 80 years or over, who will rise from 69 million today to 379 million in 2050, more than a five-fold increase.<sup>7</sup>

In nearly all countries, women live longer than men. The gap can be as much as 10.5 years in Eastern Europe, and as low as 3 years in

South-Central Asia. In developed regions, women live some 7.5 years longer than men, whereas in Latin America, their advantage is about 6.5 years.<sup>8</sup> Women make up 55 per cent of older people globally, with women to men ratios increasing with age. Among the oldest old today, 65 per cent are women. These proportions should remain relatively unchanged over the next 50 years.<sup>9</sup>

Population age structure varies greatly from region to region. Today, for example, while one out of five Europeans is 60 years or older, only one out of 20 Africans is in this age group. However, while population ageing has been occurring over a long period in developed countries, particularly in Japan, the United States and Europe, it is occurring most rapidly in the developing world.

Moreover, while the proportion of older people in the population as a whole is greatest in developed countries, the numbers are higher in less developed countries, where almost two thirds of people over 60 years of age now live. By 2050 this population is expected to quadruple, from 374 million to 1.6 billion.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of older people (51 per cent) live in cities. The rural-urban split is greatest in developed countries, where 74 per cent of older people live in urban areas. In less developed regions, which are still largely agricultural, 63 per cent of older people live in rural areas.<sup>11</sup>

As societies are beginning to adjust to the projected future of larger numbers of older people and smaller numbers of younger ones, who have historically comprised the support base, new forms of social protection for older people are needed. Countries also need to find better ways for tapping the potential contribution to development of large numbers of older people.

Ageing is thus making its way onto public policy agendas. Developed countries have focused largely on the challenges of caring for larger numbers of older people with fewer people of "working age". By contrast, most developing countries continue to rely exclusively on the extended family to take care of the dependent elderly.

### Changing family structures

At first glance, this approach might seem appropriate. In most of the developing world, elders are accorded special respect and status in society—their wisdom combined with the strength of the young to sustain the extended family. Traditionally, families were thus both honoured and obligated to care for their older members, who also contributed to the household in various ways, including advice and leadership as well as the care of young

### Who is old?

"Old age" was memorably characterized by Shakespeare in the late sixteenth century as a second childhood, "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything". However, Shakespeare's haunting image may be more true of later centuries than his own, since at that time most people simply worked until they died, generally by the age of 30 or 40. Ageing is a continuum from birth to death, but "old age" became a meaningful category in eighteenth century Europe, following the Industrial Revolution. People over a certain age began to be seen as less productive than younger workers, then gradually as "old", or no longer fit for work. As older people were left without adequate means of support, over time reformers demanded pensions and social security systems. These in turn required a standard age of retirement, and old age became linked to the age of retirement.

The United Nations defines older people as those 60 years of age and over, and the oldest old as those over 80

years of age. Definitions vary in different regions and countries. At a recent meeting in Africa the debate about where to put the threshold was intense, with representatives arguing for as low as 45 and as high as 70; ultimately, however, they agreed to select 60+, as per the United Nations standard.

In poorer countries, especially those with large agricultural populations and without formal social security systems, old age is not linked to retirement, but to the point when one's ability to contribute actively to survival falters. This too has gender implications, since research indicates that among very old people, men cease economic activities completely while women do not, instead engaging in activities such as petty trading, hairstyling or caring for young children to secure basic needs.

*Sources:* Suzanne S. Paul and James A. Paul, *Humanity Comes of Age* (New York, World Council of Churches, 1994), pp. 6-7; and ILO, *Realizing Decent Work for Older Women Workers* (Geneva, ILO, 2001).

children and the transmission of values to the younger generation.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, women traditionally enjoyed status in their later years as healers or teachers of traditional skills. Their childbearing years over, they had more independence and became less subject to male authority. In extended families in South Asia, older women could expect their sons to defer to them and their daughters-in-law to follow their instructions on how to run the household. Many still can, of course, but in general, the role of "matriarch" is eroding everywhere.

Larger trends affect family structures and traditional support systems for older people in general, and the social status of older women in particular. The changing roles of women, urbanization and migration, along with education and employment, the ravages of HIV/AIDS, natural disasters and armed conflict in many places, and everywhere, and the influence of the mass media, are reshaping the perils and potential of ageing for women.

The urban population more than doubled worldwide between 1950 and 1975 and increased another 55 per cent from 1975 to 1990. Throughout the developing world, families and traditional cultures have been affected by the process of urbanization. In most places, the older generation tended to stay in the countryside, often caring for the children of those who had gone to cities and urban areas.<sup>12</sup> In a review of demographic change and family support systems in developing countries, a report by the International Institute on Ageing (INIA) concluded that, despite enormous variability, "it is fair to say that the latter half of the twentieth century has been characterized by declining household size and a trend toward the nuclear family", two parents caring solely for their own children.<sup>13</sup>

Change in family structures is faster in the cities. A study of families and family care in Sub-Saharan Africa concluded that while the extended family type still prevails in most countries, it is changing everywhere, especially in the cities, where different lifestyles lead more and more young people to adopt the model of the nuclear family. Thus the practice of co-residence of older people with their children is declining: "Rising out-migration combined with declining fertility rates make it inevitable that the ideal of a multi-generational household will become more and more difficult for elderly men and women to attain."<sup>14</sup>

Migration also affects family structures. In recent years, more and more younger women have migrated to the cities as opportunities there increased, but also in response to economic hardship. Today, in both Latin America and the Caribbean, women outnumber men in the cities, while men outnumber women in the rural areas.<sup>15</sup> In both Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, the reverse is true.

In countries with traditional support systems, the number of women living alone is much lower than in developed countries, but still higher among women than men. This is due to a number of factors, including the fact that women live longer than men, they tend to marry older men and outlive them, and they are less likely to remarry upon the death of a spouse. Lower fertility rates reduce the availability of close kin in old age. These factors, together with changing family patterns, will leave future generations of women living alone without a formal system to support them when they become dependent.

Shifts in living arrangements are due partly to delayed marriage and changing roles for women, but also to increasing divorce rates and growing numbers of older people whose spouses have died. The trend is not limited to industrialized countries. In

Burundi, for example, an examination of United Nations data showed that the largest number of older persons live in one-person households.<sup>16</sup> Between one fifth and one third of older people in some Caribbean countries live alone, similar to levels in some European countries.<sup>17</sup>

Older women everywhere, at all levels of society and in all forms of living arrangements, can be subjected to abuse and violence. Such abuse takes many forms, including physical, emotional and financial, and neglect. Most often, the perpetrators are family members and primary caregivers, but it also occurs in institutional care facilities. Those most at risk are older women with mental or physical impairments. Poverty, childlessness, social isolation and displacement also put older women at risk for abuse, as do dependency and loss of autonomy.

### **Widowhood: a growing category**

Widowhood for women over age 60 is most prevalent in Northern Africa and Central Asia and lowest in Latin America and the Caribbean. In developing countries as a whole, much lower percentages of men than women are widowed, and married men outnumber widowers among older populations. At ages 65 and over, widows outnumber married women in most developing countries, often by a factor of two or more, while by age 75 and above, the female widowed-to-married ratio rises beyond 5 to 1 in some countries.<sup>18</sup>

Adjusting to widowhood can be difficult in all societies, but more so in developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia. Women's inheritance rights are tenuous in many countries. Family resources, including the house, the land and all the money, may be assigned to a male relative, often along with the widow herself. Widows also suffer a loss



of status, leaving them vulnerable to social isolation and depression along with discrimination and even physical violence. In South Asia, restrictions on mobility and association make it hard for women to overcome isolation once they are widowed. As the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) comments in its *State of the World Population 1998*: "Widowhood is more than the loss of a husband—it may mean the loss of a separate identity."<sup>19</sup>

## GENDER, AGEING AND CAREGIVING

Despite the strains on traditional support systems caused by migration and urbanization, community expectations that the family will take care of its older members remain strong in most parts of the developing world. In Mexico, where "the myth of the stable and responsible family" is regarded as part of the "national soul", older people feel that if they are not cared for by

their children they must have done something wrong. This is especially true of older women, who feel they are poor mothers if their children do not support them.<sup>20</sup>

In some instances, strains will be greatest where older people are living with their adult children. It increases as people live longer, because their care generally consumes a greater share of household time and income, and often reinforces older people's view of themselves as a burden.

In most countries in Africa, for example, the expectations of family care for older people fall first on spouses, then on sons, since they inherit the land and remain geographically close. Older women in particular depend on their sons, because if they divorce or become widowed, land tenure or land-use rights established through their husbands can be suspended and be re-established only through their sons. Daughters are next in line for caregiving, although once they are married, their primary responsibilities are to their husband's families. Siblings are regarded as a poor third choice, followed by the community.

Because women typically marry men who are older than they are, and because of women's higher life expectancy, old men often have younger wives to care for them. This is not true for old women, as husbands die earlier and also need care earlier. As a consequence, those most at risk of destitution in old age are older single (never married or divorced), widowed and childless women. In Kenya, for example, traditional norms require women to have at least two sons in order to be worthy of support. Those without children are even worse off, often being forced to leave their homes to avoid accusations of witchcraft.<sup>21</sup>

The plight of destitute old women is not unique to Africa. In India and Bangladesh, where care for older

### Widowhood in India

About 10 per cent of women in India are widows, compared to only 3 per cent of men, according to the 1991 census. Fifty-four per cent of women aged 60 and over are widows, as are 12 per cent of women aged 35-59. Remarriage is the exception rather than the rule; only about 10 per cent of widows marry again.

Widowers do not suffer the social stigma, restrictions and taboos associated with widows. They retain their economic resources and are more likely to remarry. In contrast, the approximately 33 million Indian widows are expected to lead chaste, austere and ascetic lives. Meeting those expectations is possible only for women who come from households prosperous enough to care for a dependent widow. Reports describe brothers-in-law who usurp the widow's share of property and do not offer her a harvest share or daily maintenance; sons who live separately and do not sup-

port the widowed mother; and brothers who do not support the widowed sister, although they inherited her share of their father's property.

Widows' survival strategies run the gamut. If they own land, they may be able to adopt a son or negotiate a daughter's marriage to a man willing to support them. Some remarry or enter partnerships with men who offer support. Some enter the wage labour force, while others continue to work in small-scale farming, trading or producing goods for sale. Those with no resources may adopt a religious way of life, living from begging, chanting prayers or singing devotional songs. Alternatively, they become prostitutes or concubines to earn enough money to live.

Source: Martha Alter Chen, *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India*. Oxford University Press, 2000, excerpted in United Nations, *The World's Women 2000, Trends and Statistics* (New York, United Nations, 2000).

widows is a primary duty for children, a rapid increase in elderly abandoned women has emerged as a critical issue in urban areas.<sup>22</sup>

Even in the past, family care of older people worked better for men than for women. Research on the Joola society of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau describes a traditional old-age support system based on daughters and daughters-in-law taking on more work as the older people become too weak to do it. But while the old man is then free from work, the old woman takes on new tasks, looking after the animals, making baskets and other household items. As a result, a proverb says that "a man gets old, but not a woman".<sup>23</sup>

In fact, even as women live longer, their caregiving duties do not end. This has long been true of women in rural areas, who are frequently responsible to care for grandchildren as their own children migrate to the cities in search of work. In recent years, the impact of HIV/AIDS, greatest among people ages 18 to 40, has magnified this situation. In some places, virtually an entire generation has been lost to the disease. As a result, older people, particularly older women, are now caring for a new generation of young children.

In poorer countries with weak health infrastructure, the responsibilities of care commonly fall on the family, primarily older women. By 2001, over five million grandparents in Africa were caring for young children as a result of the epidemic. "It is not unusual for grandmothers to be caring for 20 children", a Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies press release stated in November 2001. A study in Thailand found that two thirds of adults living with HIV/AIDS returned to live with a parent, usually the mother, and that women in their 60s and 70s were the most common caregivers.<sup>24</sup> Older women themselves are also becoming infected, either as a result

of caregiving activities with minimal protection measures, or through sexual transmission, including sexual violence.

However, education and information about the disease is rarely targeted at older women. When it strikes, it is frequently misdiagnosed. Older people succumb to the disease more quickly, owing to weaker immune systems. When women get sick first, they are often abandoned, or sent back to their families. When the husband gets sick, the wife is expected to care for him.

### **GENDER, SOCIAL PROTECTION AND HEALTH**

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*"Due to the gender-specific division of labour, women often have to care for older relatives . . . and then their husbands throughout their life cycle, and when they need help after a life full of hard work, there is no one left to care for them."*<sup>25</sup>

The ageing of populations worldwide requires that Governments devise policies to take care of growing numbers of older citizens. In the industrialized world, where population ageing started over a century ago, State-sponsored systems of support, including pensions and health care, have been developed, and today most elderly rely on such formal systems. However, women have less access to formal pensions. Their participation in the paid labour force is shorter, more irregular and more likely to be in the informal sector. Social security was created for the benefit of the wage earner and most often does not recognize the value of household work and child-rearing,

thus disadvantaging women in old age.

With the ageing of populations, spending for public pensions in developed countries will increase dramatically, and the present "pay-as-you-go" systems of funding pensions have come under scrutiny. Many countries have started to develop private pension plans to complement public support systems. There are also attempts to bring care back to the family and community, and some new initiatives stress informal caregiving as the main pillar of support in old age. Such shifts from public support back to families increase demand on informal—unpaid—caregivers. All over the world, these caregivers are mainly women, caught in the middle of the needs of their children and their ageing parents, and having to cope with the burdens of caregiving, household work and the workplace.

Retiring from work is an unimaginable luxury for many older persons. Although 155 countries currently have some kind of public system for old age, disability or survivor support, these cover only 30 per cent of all people over 60; and only 40 per cent of working-age people contribute.<sup>26</sup> In most developing countries, no more than 20 per cent of the labour force is included in regular social security systems. Coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia is estimated at 5 to 10 per cent of the working population. Elsewhere it varies greatly, ranging from 5 to 80 per cent in Latin America and between 10 and almost 100 per cent in South-East and East Asia. But a large portion of this population is covered for only a few contingencies. And people who have been working in the informal economy, predominantly women, "are likely to have very low or no incomes in old age".<sup>27</sup>

In Africa, only Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa have some sort of pension support

### Grandmothers and AIDS orphans in Africa

Clad in a faded, red Maasai shuka, frail and tired Sophia Nairobi shouts at the half-naked two-year-old boy who comes running into the hut. Handed a bowl of thick brown porridge, he inspects it before sinking onto the cow-dung floor to tuck in.

At 75, Nairobi has picked up a role she discarded more than 40 years ago. She is now the “mother” of five orphans between two and ten years old—their parents both claimed by AIDS. In fact, due to the AIDS epidemic, which has depleted thousands of Kenya’s working-age population—clearing out almost the entire economically productive middle generation in certain parts of the country—Nairobi is just one of many grandmothers who has stepped into the shoes of her dead sons and daughters. “It is a very difficult task ahead of me. I don’t think I will survive to see my grandchildren into adulthood”, she says.

Nairobi lives in the Kajiado district of Kenya’s Rift Valley. But her tale reflects what many older women in Kenya

infected with the AIDS virus, the vast majority in the 18- to 40-year-old bracket. A recent survey by the Widows and Welfare Society of Kenya shows that Nyanza province alone holds more than 390,000 AIDS orphans and 100,000 widows—people traditionally dependent on middle-aged breadwinners. By 2005, Kenya will have 1 million AIDS orphans, destroying the generational support system and forcing the very young and the very old to look after themselves and each other.

The effects of this missing generation are far-reaching. Older women frequently become wage earners, in order to support their grandchildren. For them, the double responsibility of both returning to work and acting as mother can be a crippling experience. Monica Mwendu, 59, who looks after five grandchildren says: “I have a small retail shop and a small shamba (piece of land) from where I get our daily bread. But it is a major financial struggle to fend for the kids and educate them.”

for older people. Elsewhere, some of the ways in which women make ends meet are to rent parts of their homes, sell water to those who do not have running water and trade in charcoal and vegetables.

*“I cannot die of hunger while hanging on to heirlooms”, says Akoeba Gogo, hoping she will die before she runs out of things to sell.*<sup>28</sup>

In Asia the situation is better—but only slightly. Although Governments have begun to develop welfare policies for older people, including livelihood protection, the expenditures are very small. Even in more prosperous countries, such as China, Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea or Singapore, Governments encourage reliance on the family for support of the aged. For example, in 1995, Singapore introduced the Maintenance of Parents Act, which allows parents to sue neglectful offspring for financial support.<sup>29</sup>

Even where some assistance is available, older people often encounter obstacles in obtaining it, ranging from transport difficulties to

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