

Older Women's Challenges Through a Latin American Lens

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It is undeniable that older women, in all their diversity, are rights holders who can make a significant contribution to the social, economic, and sustainable development of our societies. Yet they have historically been overlooked and made “invisible” in policymaking decisions at national, regional, and international levels.

In this article, I focus on “the invisible ones,” the millions of older Latin American women who, day after day, are faced with structural inequalities aggravated by the intersection of age and gender. I also pay homage to their invaluable contributions as professionals, mothers, grandmothers, friends, activists, and powerful and active agents of change. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects 2022, women outnumber men at older ages in almost all populations. Globally, women make up 55.7 percent of persons aged 65 or older in 2022, and their share is projected to decline slightly — to 54.5 percent — by 2050.¹ Despite these worldwide trends, older women have historically been overlooked in the discussions held in various international fora. But why is it important for the international community to listen to older women in all their diversity, address their needs and challenges, and foster their true role as leaders and active agents of change?

We all witnessed the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of older persons. According to the United Nations *World Population Prospects 2022*,² the pandemic directly or indirectly cost the lives of about 15 million people in 24 months, 82 percent of whom were older people.

COVID-19 amplified and made visible the sharpest inequalities that older people face. The harsh reality of the crisis exposed and exacerbated ageism; the lack of social protection and access to health services; the lack of autonomy and participation older persons have in decision making; and the increase in violence, neglect, and abuse, which particularly affected older women.

As the *United Nations Advocacy Brief on Older Women* pointed out, the international human rights and policy frameworks provide robust guarantees and tools for the promotion and protection of women’s rights. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, in particular, protects the rights of women through their life span and addresses some of the specific issues faced by older women. However, the absence of a specific convention on the rights of older persons results in gaps in the protection of older women as a distinct group. The

existence of such gaps in the international human rights framework is one of the main reasons older persons, and in particular older women, remain overlooked in policy making decisions.³

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the **Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons** came into force in 2017, ratified by Argentina, among other countries. In addition, the Argentine National Congress granted constitutional hierarchy to this very important regional instrument in November 2022. Because of this decision, the Convention is now part of Argentina’s National Constitution.

The Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons is much more than a document; it represents concrete protection against the violations of the human rights and dignity of older persons. It provides a unique protection framework at the forefront of other legislation, showing the unwavering leading role of Latin America and the Caribbean region in the promotion and protection of the human rights of older persons.

This legal framework is crucial in addressing the many distinct challenges that older Latin American women face. The intersection of age and gender results in older women experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities throughout their lifetime. They face economic insecurity to a greater extent than older men, and they are more vulnerable to violence, neglect, abuse, and social exclusion. These challenges are intensified if we consider that projections indicate that poverty and extreme poverty rates remain above pre-pandemic levels in 2022 in Latin America and the Caribbean, as stated by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in its *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean 2022* report.⁴

Despite these challenges, older women are pillars of society. Although older persons are often described as dependent and recipients of care, many older women provide unpaid care work to other older persons and family members, and this often goes unrecognized. During the COVID-19 pandemic, more than half of older women (57 percent) ages 60 years or older reported increased time spent on unpaid care and domestic work.⁵ In many countries, grandparents, and especially grandmothers, play a crucial role in allowing their sons and daughters to work by providing support in the care of their grandchildren.

In this regard, I am very proud to share the important outcomes of the XV Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the

Caribbean, which took place November 7 to 11, 2022, in Argentina. At this conference, member states adopted the Buenos Aires Commitment, in which they recognized the right to provide and receive care.

The Buenos Aires Commitment adopted a gender and intersectional approach, with specific references to older women in its operative paragraphs 5 and 22, recognizing that “the unfair distribution of time use and the current social organization of care disproportionately affect women, in particular older women, among others,” as well as the importance of “participation of women’s and feminist organizations and movements, including those of older women in the design, implementation and monitoring of care policies.” In operative paragraph 15, member states also agreed to “promote the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies and programs that contribute from a gender and human rights perspective to aging with dignity in a safe and healthy environment, and to the highest attainable standard of health and well-being for older persons.”⁶

In this regard, I would like to share as good practice the Recognition of Contributions for Care Tasks, a comprehensive program being implemented in Argentina. The program recognizes and grants economic value to the work that women have done in raising their children. In that regard, it grants the opportunity for those women to retire even though they do not yet have the required years of contribution to the social security system. The measure addresses the historical inequalities between men and women and between paid and unpaid work, resulting in a better redistribution of the tasks between sexes and contributing to a fairer social organization of care.⁷

As chair of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing and vice chair of the Commission on the Status of Women representing the Latin American and Caribbean region, I have a strong commitment to continuing to raise awareness of the challenges and needs of older women and promoting this agenda in the United Nations system. In this sense, it is essential that the rights of older women in all their diversity be addressed at the most important specific forum for gender issues at the United Nations. In 2023, the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women and its priority theme, “Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls,” is a critical opportunity to highlight the challenges faced by older women and make their voices heard.

This article is intended to reflect on the most pressing challenges faced by older women, in particular in Latin America and the Caribbean region. However, I would like to conclude by emphasizing that the need for an international legal instrument on the human rights of older persons is undeniable. The pandemic not only exposed the serious consequences that the lack of an international legal instrument on the human rights of older persons has had on the full protection of their rights but also revealed the urgent need to address these issues as a priority of the international community.

In this sense, the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing has a crucial role as the main multilateral platform and the only body in the United Nations system devoted to addressing the challenges faced by older persons. I am convinced that the only way to move forward is together. Let us continue working together until the human rights of all older persons in every corner of the world are fully protected. ●

¹ UN World Population Prospects 2022: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

² Ibid.

³ UN Advocacy Brief on Older Women: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/UN-Advocacy-Brief-Older-Women.pdf>

⁴ Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean 2022: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/social-panorama-latin-america-and-caribbean-2022-transforming-education-basis-sustainable-development>

⁵ UN World Population Prospects 2022: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

⁶ Buenos Aires Commitment: <https://conferenciamujer.cepal.org/15/en/documents/buenos-aires-commitment>

⁷ <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/en-el-marco-de-la-mesa-interministerial-de-cuidados-se-presento-el-programa-integral-para>



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